

# Realizing the Potential of FFS1 with Contextual Data

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## I. Introduction: Where do We Go From Here?

As the papers in this conference have consistently demonstrated, the FFS project is making a major contribution to our understanding of the dramatic changes in family life underway in the world's industrialized countries. Although single country analyses continue to play an important role, a wide range of scholars has been challenged to go beyond the analysis of single countries to consider how differences in *context* shape the processes that seem to be having an impact on these new family patterns. Patterns of regional differences have become much clearer, helping to focus on the historical and social contexts embedded in the world's regions that shape the decisions of young adults making their transitions into and out of family roles. We are beginning to realize some of the potential of placing young women's decisions in the context of the constraints and preferences of their partners, which has become possible for those studies that included men in their design, a major contribution in which the European vision was much clearer than was the case in the United States. There has even been some progress on using the data to focus on the temporal context, as the processes shaping the behaviors of different cohorts are examined.

In this paper, I will review some of these contextual dimensions, suggesting why they are so important. But my major focus will be on highlighting the value of commencing a small project to enrich the current series of FFS datasets by creating a data archive of contextual data. We need to

be able to specify to the extent feasible *what* it is that distinguishes these different contexts, including not just the economic opportunities available to young people and their (potential) partners via the labor market and the public support system but also the values and attitudes of the important others whose reactions form part of their decision-making. We need such information over time, as one of the most important characteristics of the changes underway in this phenomenon we sometimes call “the second demographic transition” is that not only are the behaviors themselves changing rapidly, with the postponement of marriage and childbearing, the growth in cohabitation and union dissolution, and the emergence of nonfamily living in many regions, but the factors that affect these behaviors, that encourage early marriage or reduce the likelihood of divorce, appear to be changing rapidly as well. The challenge facing the FFS project is to create major added value to the current round of surveys by organizing contextual data for the data sets of countries in the first round, whatever the prospects might be for developing a second round.

## II. Geographic Context: Countries and Regions

Among the clearest findings from the current FFS project are the dramatic regional differences that characterize the set of countries undergoing the second demographic transition. More than half of the papers in this conference are directly comparative, focusing either on differences between countries within regions (such as between Italy and Spain, or between Russia, Poland, Latvia, and Hungary) or differences between countries in different regions (such as between France and Sweden and between Germany and Italy).

Of course, even as these studies show, differences between similar countries sharpen, while those between countries in more separate regions often attenuate. There are always exceptions, and of course we cannot completely agree on the specific boundaries, whether between or within countries, that delineate areas with similar patterns and separate them from those with different ones. The broad outlines, however, are clear, from south to north within Europe and from west to east. The challenge is increasingly to go beyond the cultural geography of Europe and to integrate the non-European countries on which we have parallel data into this “geographic” framework. We are beginning to think about what the sources might be of the similarities between Canada, New Zealand, and the United States on the one hand and the United Kingdom on the other, or why there are similarities between Japan and southern Europe, or why consensual unions are common in many areas of Latin America, although they are rare in the European region from which so many of their European-origin populations came.

To meet this challenge, we want to know whether these differences between regions are linked with differences in the structure of economies, which by generating jobs for young men and/or women, or by offsetting some of the costs of family life with systems of family support, affect young adults’ ability to plan for the major decisions involved in union formation and parenthood or provide young women the independence to delay or even forego the economic support that often accompanies marriage. How are the differences we observe between countries and regions shaped by the differences in attitudes and values that pressure young women to find an affluent, supportive partner in her family building process, and that pressure young men to be good providers? And how can we begin to find the answers to these questions? How does context count?

### III. The Gender Context: The Roles and Goals of Men and Women

One of the most fundamental factors shaping the family building decisions of young men and women in industrialized countries is the structure of family roles. Must men be sole providers for a family with no help meeting its costs from their partner, the state, or their employers? Must women have the sole responsibility for the care of their homes and families, and hence need to arrange private substitutes in order to be able to work, extort help from their partners with housework and child care, mislead the state to obtain benefits by claiming that they are unemployed when in fact they are in the first months after childbirth, and hide their families from their employers?

Despite the availability of data on men in many of the FFS surveys, the gender context receives much less attention in these papers than the geographic context. I noted three papers that addressed the issue in some form: a comparison of Sweden and Hungary by Olah which focused on gender effects, one on France by Ekart-Jaffe and Solaz, which focused on couples and asked how the effects of *her* unemployment differed from those of *his* unemployment, and one on Slovenia by Istenic and Kveder, which asks whether partnership and parenthood histories have different effects on men's and women's contraceptive usage. It is nice to see an examination of the effects of work on both men and women, and even nicer (and rarer) to see an analysis of the effects of family on men as well as women. If we are to understand the direction of the second demographic transition, however, we need to continue to pursue many more such studies.

In this context, one of the most interesting set of results I have seen recently was in a paper given at this year's meeting of the Population Association of America, which showed that whereas in the late 1960s, the fertility levels of the countries of Europe and North America were negatively

related to their levels of female labor force participation, with the countries that had high fertility being those with low levels of female labor force participation, by the 1990s, these two dimensions of the second demographic transition were positively related (Rindfuss, et al. 2000). The authors speculate that the differences and changes they observe result from a range of differences in social context, economic opportunity, and day care availability, and provide some evidence of the reasonableness of their speculations. But many of the differences they find also track closely with the strength of gender role differentiation.

Another exciting series of results has been produced by Jan Hoem and various colleagues, as they have examined the relationship between women's educational levels and their likelihood of divorce. Data for Italy, Sweden, and (the former West) Germany were analyzed comparatively on the question: what is the effect of female education on marital dissolution, and does the effect vary between countries? The results indicated that although the effect in each case was positive, the strength of the effect was much greater in Italy than in Germany, which in turn showed a stronger effect than in Sweden (Blossfeld, et al. 1995). A more detailed study for Sweden similarly showed that the effects of female education on union dissolution have diminished over time in that country (Hoem 1995).

What these results suggest is that the "independence hypothesis" normally attributed to Nobel Prize winning economist Gary Becker, which posits that the tie between men and women is predicated on the exchange of men's earnings for women's family-related services and hence predicts that as women attain the ability to support themselves and perhaps even children, they will be less likely to enter and more likely to leave partnerships with men (Becker 1991), is not a timeless

one. It reflects a particular period and its opportunities and values. The revolution in women's economic roles, which has been in process in each of these countries, may have had short-run destabilizing effects. A new pattern appears to be emerging, however, in which the growth of egalitarian marriage has changed the bargain between men and women in families, as seems clearest for Sweden. Each country may follow similar trajectories as it passes through this transition, even though the precise patterns and levels will likely be shaped by distinctive factors at the country level, reflecting specific histories, cultures, politics, and economies.

#### IV. Changing Contexts: The "Progress" of the Second Demographic Transition

The question of gender raises most preeminently that of change, because it may be the most rapidly changing element underway in all of the countries undergoing the second demographic transition. In this context, I would like to point to my own work with Pierre Turcotte and Alexander Kopp on the changing relationship between educational levels and union formation patterns in Canada, the US, Sweden, and Italy using FFS data. We examined both men and women for Canada, and the results indicate that for the cohorts of Canadian men and women that could be observed there was a transformation in the relationship between levels of human capital and union formation. Whereas the older cohorts appeared to make decisions following the assumptions of Gary Becker, with more educated men entering unions faster than less educated men, testifying to their "good provider" prowess, and more educated women using their "independence" to delay entry, among the younger cohorts this relationship had transformed. More educated women were evidently able to attract more and more committed partners, and hence entered unions more rapidly,

and particularly the more committed union of marriage, than less educated women, while among men the “good provider” pattern attenuated substantially. In this change, women in Canada appeared to be converging with patterns shown by the comparable US cohorts. Significant changes also appeared for Swedish and Italian women that indicated that the Becker pattern was attenuating.

The question of change is a fundamental and ubiquitous one for scholars interested in the second demographic transition, as this conference suggests. When fundamental social processes are changing rapidly, those who “lead the way” are normally quite different from those who come later. Migration scholars know that the early members of a new stream are very different from those who come later. The leaders are innovative, willing to take the risks entailed in leaving family and friends behind, while those who come later are taking fewer risks, as they have well-established contacts of family and friends in the destination. Similarly, in the early years of the AIDS epidemic, many people felt safe from the fact that the early victims had led extremely active sexual lives, with very many partners. But when the chance of infection is low, those with the most opportunities will be most likely to get infected. When the disease has spread, the odds of encountering an infected partner go up rapidly even for those with a small number of partners. Again, the leaders differ substantially from the followers.

The factors predicting behavior—or infection—change rapidly, the more rapidly the phenomenon under study is changing. And the second demographic transition has spread through the industrialized countries with extraordinary rapidity, particularly in comparison to the union and fertility patterns of the 1960s, and given the conservative nature of the institution involved—the family. We should be continually alert to the likelihood that the relationships we observe at one point

in time might not characterize other points in time, and begin to theorize about the directions of change.

The FFS1 round of surveys can and should be used to do so, because, although of course it is wonderful to have more rounds of data, the existing FFS surveys have enough age variation to allow us to examine change quite thoroughly. We should be including indicators of cohort in our models not just to adjust for changes in level (estimating, for example, the increase in cohabitation over time) but also to test for changes in process, treating time not just additively but interactively, in order to assess whether relationships are changing over time. This is easiest for surveys that include people over a longer age span. The analysis of Canada described above was enormously benefited by the fact that we had cases who were in their 50s at the time of the survey, reporting on their union and parental experiences 30 or more years earlier. It was unfortunate that so many of the FFS data sets have low cut-off ages such as 44, 43, or even 42. For the question, “are they finished childbearing?”, these cutoffs may make sense (at least for most women), but they make no sense for addressing the larger question of change that the family *histories* make possible.

Nevertheless, I was pleased to see that three papers appeared to address the question of change using a single round of surveys (and a further three did so, as well, using multiple data sources). In particular, the Billari and Kohler paper on first births in Germany and Italy addresses the question of convergence between countries, investigating change over time in the link between union formation and first birth. However, none of the other five studies, even those using multiple data sets, appears to be directly focused on examining change in the processes being studied.

## V. The Importance of Context

The major limitation to using FFS surveys to examine the question of how context is shaping the trajectory of the second demographic transition, however, is the absence of useful measures of context. In my papers with Turcotte, we use “time” as an indicator for changing contexts, but it is important to figure out what it *is* that has led to change over time. The large group of papers at this conference that compare countries are also using crude indicators of context—country—but countries differ on many dimensions and we need to know which differences are having the most impact on creating the patterns of difference that emerge.

There is a growing scholarly tradition of studies that examine the factors influencing social processes at multiple levels. How is people’s behavior shaped, not just by their own histories and characteristics, but by the opportunities and constraints in their social and economic environments? Is women’s likelihood of marriage shaped by the availability of unmarried men, and particularly, stably employed unmarried men? This question has been addressed with increasing frequency in the US, beginning with the studies of Fossett and Kiecolt (1991) and Lichter et al. (1991). The theoretical context of the original studies—they were trying to explain differences in marriage rates between white and black women—might have made them not seem immediately relevant to the European scene. Nevertheless, in many countries the economic prospects of young men have been shifting rapidly, and this may have played a role in the trends we are all facing.

Further, more recent studies have asked broader questions relating various dimensions of the social and economic context to women’s family-related behavior. Analysts have found that the level of neighborhood poverty weakens the relationship between childbirth and marriage for women

(South and Crowder 1999), although the relationship appears to be conditioned by the level of public assistance and residence in a metropolitan area (McLaughlin and Lichter 1993). Further, differences in the availability of partners, and particularly high quality partners, strongly affect women's likelihood of marrying a higher status male (Lichter and Anderson 1995). In fact, the composition of potential partners in conjunction with other characteristics of the area, has broad effects on educational assortative mating (Lewis and Oppenheimer 2000).

There is also evidence that young *men's* entry into marriage has been affected by changes in the characteristics of unmarried women. Women's increased independence decreased men's likelihood of marrying in the 1980s (Lloyd and South 1996). I am working with a graduate student on the question of whether the increase in parenthood among unmarried women has also contributed to the decrease in men's likelihood of union formation, based on some results we observed for Sweden (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 1999).

There is now a growing tradition in Sweden of adding data to the 1992 SFS, reflecting the great availability of data in that country. Scholars have added personal income data for all adult years for sample members (Bracher and Santow 1998; Sundstrom 199?), a feat that might be matched elsewhere, although it is certainly unlikely in the US. Contextual data have also been added to individual level Swedish data, including the SFS, producing analyses that are showing rich effects. A recent paper has shown that changes in the availability of public employment between the mid 1980s and the mid 1990s in Sweden accounted for a substantial proportion of changes in the tempo and current level of childbearing among Swedish women in their 20s, who responded to the loss of easily obtained employment by greatly increasing their enrollment in school (Hoem 2000). Santow

and Bracher (in progress) assembled a rich set of local data, including information on the availability of sex education programs in public schools, to track the near total decline of adolescent fertility in Sweden.

Of course, this raises many questions. As Rivellini pointed out in his paper in the third session of this conference, which context is it that matters? Is it where respondents live at the time of the survey? Where they were living in adolescence? That analysis suggests that for migrants, current residence has more power than residence in adolescence. However, with no specific measures beyond size of place, it might be that if more characteristics of current residence were controlled, the effect of the characteristics of residence in adolescent might sharpen. We do not know. Or the pattern might differ depending on the outcome being studied, with educational expectations set at one stage of the life course and the likelihood of divorce being shaped at a very different time.

But we would begin to find out if good contextual data were made available by the scholars who did so much work to produce the various studies of the FFS. In my project with Pierre Turcotte, we have been using earnings data from the Luxembourg Income Study to see if the changes we observed in the relationship between educational attainment and union formation were related to changing opportunities for men and women. We had great difficulties obtaining these data and in understanding them when we did obtain them. In the case of Canadian data, we ended up having to get better data from a local expert. It is my belief that if those present here at the conference, many of whom have had experience with contextual data in various forms, could get together, we could draw up a brief list that would, if made available, add enormously to the value of the existing FFS data files. I hope that we can do it.



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