

Utilizing Uncertainty: Prevailing optimism and the pursuit of fertility goals among couples in rural Malawi

S. Garver, Department of Sociology, The Ohio State University

INTRODUCTION

Recent literature that examines how future uncertainty bears on reproductive decision-making represents both a rebirth of investigations of the insurance effect in high fertility settings¹, and a new line of inquiry predicated on the claim that individuals face increasingly precarious futures. Contemporarily, uncertain livelihoods are a function of migration patterns², the HIV/AIDS epidemic³, macroeconomic crises⁴, and the political economy of capitalist societies which increasingly transfers uncertainty from the institutional sphere to the individual⁵.

Uncertainty is hypothesized to affect fertility in both tempo and quantum. While the idea became prominent in the literature in the 1980s⁶, researchers have continued to investigate both macro and micro-level manifestations of uncertainty across various life domains. Uncertainty affects the timing of fertility insofar as it can accelerate births when health risks are perceived⁷, or delay children when socioeconomic crises occur⁸. Less explored are the ways in which the ongoing experience of *chronic* uncertainty among individuals with seasonally-dependent livelihoods affects couple's childbearing plans for the future and the ways in which fertility histories unfold.

At first glance, one might argue that in fact childbearing is not planned in low-resource settings. Instead, large families are a product of limited resources which encourages larger kin networks⁹, and poor educational systems that inhibit career opportunities and limit reproductive health knowledge¹⁰. While some of these themes do bear out in our qualitative data in rural Malawi, I specifically investigated the extent to which the formation of childbearing plans and the management of uncertain (and precarious) livelihoods are interdependent.

DATA & METHODS

This work draws upon 66 semi-structured interviews with women and men -- the vast majority of whom are couples -- living in rural Malawi during the first half of 2016. Our sample is drawn from a 2014 baseline wave of an epidemiological cohort study. The data are part of an ongoing research program known as Umoyo Wathanzi (UTHA) which has been conducting community and clinic-based research since 2013 within the catchment area of a rural hospital founded by an

international nonprofit organization. At baseline, a subset (n=767) of the total 1,034 women and their partners who participated in the cohort study received a module for measuring livelihood uncertainty. Substantively, the module was derived from qualitative work in the study setting while conceptually, the framework for the measure was derived from a multidisciplinary literature review. From the baseline sample, and in accordance with the Anomalous Case Analysis method¹¹, I analyzed the measure of uncertainty for typical cases and outliers based on its association with fertility desires. Using these two types of cases as strata, I randomly sampled roughly 15 couples from each group. These 29 couples became the basis of our semi-structured in-depth interviews. Of the women, we conducted follow-up interviews with 19 women after 3 months, once the harvesting season was finished. We interviewed the male partners at the time of the woman's first interview. All interviews were conducted by two trained Malawian research assistants in Chichewa, the local language in Malawi's central region. Interviews were then translated to English by the interviewer and transcribed by the lead author. An additional research assistant who had worked previously with the research program was employed to independently translate and transcribe roughly one half of the interviews as a form of validating the quality of translation and for speed of process.

ANALYSIS

Currently, the data are undergoing qualitative analysis that includes multiple rounds of content coding in order to generate themes and to identify patterns and make case comparisons. As primarily couple-level data, a key component of the analysis is the degree to which mindsets towards the future converge and diverge between husband and wife. The topics of the interview centered around household insecurity, relationship, fertility and contraception history, and plans and expectations of the future as it relates to livelihood conditions and childbearing. We draw upon a broad conceptualization of livelihood. In addition to economics, we considered the importance of relationships, food security, and health risks as important domains affecting both current and future household conditions.

PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Optimism, a “Plan”, and Utilizing Uncertainty

To date, three key themes have emerged from the data which appear to bear heavily on how people talk about their future, their childbearing plans, and the likelihood of accomplishing their

goals. First, I find that uncertain futures are faced with a “plan” and a prevailing optimism, relying on future change to bring needed opportunities. Respondents use a language of “finding money” to support the household, but rather than knowing *how* one’s plans will be achieved, uncertainty is repurposed as the potential key to reducing economic hardship.

“If things can go well with our agriculture we can also buy fertilizer for the next year so that we cannot just spend the money in any which way, so that we do not face challenges in the future.” (married woman, age 32)

In nearly all cases respondents could verbalize a plan for the future, had positive expectations (though some wavered upon further probing), but their solution for how to accomplish those goals depended on the ability to capitalize on opportunities that were as of yet, unknown.

Avoiding “many”, but not “more”

Within that frame of mind, children are viewed paradoxically: Avoiding “many” children is paramount, but having “more” children is unlikely to affect the household condition.

“Aah, to have more children is not creating a problem in the household but nowadays to have many children, it’s very difficult to manage...” (married male, age 28)

When asked about the consequence of having another child, respondents tended to fall in to one of two categories: (1) Being adamant that they “are [currently] not thinking about having children” and subsequently found it difficult to engage in a discussion of the effects of having a child now, or (2) desiring a child, waiting to “see things happen”, and instead emphasizing the need to avoid a total fertility that is “too many.” Respondents found it easy to discuss how *completed* fertility could have either positive or negative effects on the household condition and well-being of the household but in practice described a process of childbearing much more dependent on “seeing things happen” and avoiding past mistakes, notably unintended pregnancy.

The Insurance Effect as a Baseline, not an upper limit

A consistent argument for uncertainty’s effect on fertility is via the “Insurance Effect”, where contexts of high child mortality are linked to higher desired and completed fertility. While this thinking is definitely not the strongest theme present, it does stand out as a ‘necessary but not sufficient’ theme for understanding childbearing plans and behaviors in this context. At the lower

end, the fear of child mortality precludes couples from remaining with only one or two children. Yet child mortality was one of the few motivations people voiced when explaining why many avoid having only one or two children despite struggling in the household. The fear of child mortality in many cases extends the window of time during which a woman may be vulnerable to an unintended pregnancy despite a stated (and confident) desire to not have any more children.

“We are thinking of this situation [in the household] but we are thinking that maybe the other child may die, so I would want to have another one because after maybe 5 or 6 years we will have confidence that at least we may remain with that child in the family.”
(married male, 25)

For this couple, despite agreeing to remain with only two children (notably a rare compromise between the husband and wife), the primary motivation for not having one child as the wife desired was the fear of child mortality.

CONCLUSION

Moving forward, these three themes appear prominent for understanding how uncertainty is experienced, managed, and reconfigured when pursuing a stable economic livelihood and a well-supported household. I will finish at least two rounds of coding with all interviews, allowing existing themes to strengthen while conceptually clarifying existing ones. With the generated themes, I will analyze the overlapping thematic patterns, and classify participants based on their (1) fertility desires, and (2) fertility outcomes experienced (e.g. unintended pregnancy) to see how these themes differentiate couples (and individuals). A majority of participants shared experiences of unintended pregnancy. I hypothesize that the management of uncertainty and the difficulty in formulating predictable expectations of the future are a key explanation for these events. Ultimately, I seek to show how people manage and reconfigure uncertainty so as to still be known as “someone who plans” while also needing to make deliberate decisions related to avoiding pregnancy and pursuing fertility goals.

Economics are a justifiable reason for limiting household size, and fertility goals are pursued as much for social respectability as they are a practical solution. These plans are juxtaposed with the acknowledgement of uncertainty, the inability to know *how* one will achieve goals, and the difficulty articulating *next* steps related to childbearing (despite having a desired family size).

WORKS CITED

- ¹ LeGrand, T., Koppenhaver, T., Mondain, N. and Randall, S. (2003), Reassessing the Insurance Effect: A Qualitative Analysis of Fertility Behavior in Senegal and Zimbabwe. *Population and Development Review*, 29: 375–403. doi:10.1111/j.1728-4457.2003.00375.x
- ² Wood, J., & Neels, K. (2016). First a job, then a child? Subgroup variation in women's employment-fertility link. *Advances in Life Course Research*.
- ³ Trinitapoli, J., & Yeatman, S. (2011). Uncertainty and fertility in a generalized AIDS epidemic. *American Sociological Review*, 76(6), 935-954.
- ⁴ Goldstein, J., Kreyenfeld, M., Jasilioniene, A., & Örsal, D. D. K. (2013). Fertility reactions to the "Great Recession" in Europe: Recent evidence from order-specific data. *Demographic Research*, 29, 85-104.
- ⁵ Mills, M., Blossfeld, H. P., & Klijzing, E. (2005). Becoming an adult in uncertain times. *Globalization, Uncertainty and Youth in Society: The Losers in a Globalizing World*, 438.
- ⁶ Cain, M. (1981). Risk and insurance: Perspectives on fertility and agrarian change in India and Bangladesh. *Population and development review*, 435-474.
- ⁷ Hayford, S. R., Agadjanian, V., & Luz, L. (2012). Now or never: perceived HIV status and fertility intentions in rural Mozambique. *Studies in family planning*, 43(3), 191-199.
- ⁸ Agadjanian, V. (2005). Fraught with ambivalence: Reproductive intentions and contraceptive choices in a sub-Saharan fertility transition. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 24(6), 617-645.
- ⁹ Mason, K. O. (2001). Gender and family systems in the fertility transition. *Population and Development Review*, 27, 160-176.
- ¹⁰ Diamond, I., Newby, M., & Varle, S. (1999). Female education and fertility: examining the links.
- ¹¹ Axinn, W. G., & Pearce, L. D. (2006). *Mixed method data collection strategies*. Cambridge University Press.