Introduction

While having children is an individual or couple based decision, general population trends help to indicate correlations between certain factors and fertility. Among these factors is the state of the economy. For an individual deciding on potential children, the expected costs can help to explain whether or not a person knowingly and purposefully plans to have children. These expected costs can be compared to the actual income of individuals and couples planning for children and from there, fertility decisions can be made. Apart from the state of the economy, developed countries in general have lower birthrates (Crosignani, 2010). The desire for children has steadily decreased as well as the desire for a large family size. In addition to these, continuous research indicates a large number of variables impacting birth rates including birth spacing, education levels, race and marital status (Crosignani, 2010; Jacobsen and Marther, 2010; Lutz, 2006).

The concept of this research is to combine the qualitative data on personal ideologies about having children with the quantitative data on how the economy has impacted these fertility decisions. The proposed research will use the phrase “fertility decisions” as a way to describe any form of decision regarding reproduction, including birth control as a means of preventing pregnancy or delaying pregnancy, family or couple discussions about having children, or any personal ideologies and plans about reproducing. This research hopes to present an understanding of how the economy impacts the personal ideologies on childbearing.
Research Aims

On the most basic level, my research aims to gain insight on the cultural ideologies behind the decision to either have or not have children. The more involved portion of the proposed research hopes to answer to question: what are the immediate effects of an economic recession on an individual’s decision to have children? In developed countries across the global, the total fertility rate has lowered (Crosignani, 2010). As a developed country, the United States follows the same trend. Though there is some controversy on the actual start date or month of the economic recession, most studies use December of 2007 when the unemployment steadily increased beyond the average five percent (Jacobsen and Marther, 2010). Since this time frame, birthing rates across the U.S. seem to have only experienced small decline, as little as one percent. This research proposes to probe whether there an awareness of an economic recession has an impact on an individual’s decision to have children.

Theoretical Framework

As the proposed research includes economic components and the impact on general society, my thesis is based in shallow Marxist theory. Taken from Marx’s The Critique of Political Economy, “it is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but, on the contrary, their social existence determines their consciousness.” (Marx 1906). This
will be interpreted for the purpose of this research as the outside, non-personal preferences that affect the decision to have children, namely, economics.

Marxist theory will be used to understand the way in which people view their decision-making abilities, focusing on the economic and political variables that impact their decisions. Since decisions operate on a number of levels, including individual, familial, state and the international levels, these factors will be looked at to correlate connections made to fertility choices. The individual level will be looked at based on personal ideologies and choices about having children. The familial level will take into account more variables, including how having other children affects the decision to have more, how having one versus multiple incomes changes perspective, how the dialogue between partners creates a decision, among other factors. The state and international levels will be touched upon lightly where factors like tax breaks, healthcare and schooling affects decisions in addition to the cultural norms and expectations. Finally, how the international level, for instance the Roman Catholic Church, impacts a person’s decision to use birth control or have multiple children.

Background and Significance

Every year, a report is made available to the public by the U.S. Department of Agriculture on the average expenditures that come with having children (Lino 2010). The report takes into account multiple factors including ages, income levels and location to come up with an estimated yearly cost. While the facts and figures of having children are widely available, there is little information on how this affects family fertility decision-making.
The research proposes to gain insight on the ideas within contemporary American culture surround the thought process of having children. While financial statistics, for instance the U.S.D.A report on average expenditures are useful, this research proposes to find out the degree to which this type of information affects reproductive choices. The proposed research plans to make connections between personal and cultural ideologies with the economic factors that influence decisions about children. As opposed to looking at the life history of an individual, this research will focus on the immediate effects an economic recession can have on the decision to have a family.

Recent birthrates in developed countries have indicated a lowered desire for children as a general trend (Crosignani, 2010). Research looking at birthing rates prior to 1950 reports that the majority of childless women answered that not being married was the main reason for not having children. Today, as birthing rates continue to decline, multiple factors continue to impact the decision to have children (Crosignani, 2010; Jacobsen and Marther, 2010; Lutz, 2006). These fertility choices are related to education, income, and political stability (Crosignani, 2010).

Lutz et al (2006) presented the Low Fertility Trap Hypothesis, which theorizes that birthrates will continue to fall. The hypothesis is composed of three main parts: demographic, sociological and economic. Demography accounts for the current low birthrates, which lead to fewer numbers of potential parents in the future. The sociological element is based on the studies of changing perceptions on ideal family size. Finally, the economic factor accounts for a combination of expected income and estimated expenditures. Together, these elements indicate a steadily declining birthrate in developed countries. It
would be expected that any additional financial or social restraints, such as an economic recession, would indicate a decline in the desire for children as well as actual birthrates.

Data collected by Jacobsen and Marther (2010) on U.S. population trends since 2000 compare the recent economic recession to previous recessions in addition to the Great Depression of the 1920’s. During the Great Depression, birthrate data reports that the average number of children per woman was just below 2.5, while the recessions of the 1980’s and 1990’s were just above 1.5 and 2.0, respectively (Jacobsen and Marther, 2010). While there is data available on the current birthrates, there is controversy on the reporting of definite decline due to the recession. Certain states, such as Arkansas, have experienced a decrease in birthrate as much as 13.8 percent, but the overall yearlong average decline for the country has only seen a 1.6 percent decline.

Whereas numerical data can indicate correlations between income and unemployment rates among other factors, my research proposes to also include qualitative data that probes whether or not the declining birthrate is a purposeful decision based on the state of the economy. In addition, I would like to include perceptions of the recession and how they affect fertility decisions, such as optimism about the economy getting better or pessimism leading to the decision to forego having children.

Methods

My research is specifically aimed at contemporary, mainstream American views on reproduction. More specifically, the proposed thesis will look at the way in which
fertility planning is influenced by the state of the economy among other economic factors. This mainly takes into account income levels but not exclusively. As interview and survey data is collected, trends will hopefully indicate other factors that affect decisions including recent immigrations, financial expenditures, education levels and more.

In order to have a larger sample size, data will be collected from men and women as well as those who have and have not had children. Snowball sampling will be used in order to effectively gather an appropriate sample size. In addition to participants who have children, my research will include participants who have not yet had children but want to; participants who do not want children; and participants who wanted children but never had them. By including these groups into my proposed research, I hope to gain ideological reasoning behind their individual decisions.

To cover the wide range of participants, a general survey will be used to indicate factors that help shape fertility and reproductive decisions. Survey questions will be developed based on the conversations that arise during interviews. Common themes found in interviews will be used to create condensed questions for short but accurate questions. Open-ended questions will be utilized during interviews and focus groups for a broad interpretation to look at ideologies. Surveys and questionnaires will be administered to individuals but envelope entire households for a greater understanding on the environment, as well as to increase sample size. Surveys will be composed of close-ended and likert scale questions. Based on answers, trends will be analyzed for commonalities and correlations.

Although I cannot say for certain, there are no current plans for participant observation. Despite the possibility of greater evolutionary success, current time and
financial restraints restrict my ability to contribute to the gene pool in coordination with the writing of this thesis.

Analysis

As mentioned in the methods section, interviews will be used as the basis for survey questions to form more focus around the variables that will be used for formulate adequate questions. Surveys will be used for basic descriptive and demographic purposes. Through these, R software will be used to analyze for common trends among like groups. Questions on a likert scale will be used to measure the degree to which an economic recession would have impacted their decision, among other factors. Rates of unemployment, increases or decreases in pay, and the expected versus actual amount of income will be used to analyze the correlation between the economic impact on an individual and that impact on their decision to have children. For this research, I would also like to determine if those who have a sense of optimism about the recession and state of the economy are more likely to have or plan on having children. Included in this will be questions that focus on the immediacy of any possible planning or decision-making. This encompasses plans to hold off on wanted children until the economy improves; personal decisions on not having children regardless of the state of the economy; and any other short and long term plans on having children. Multiple regressions and interactions between factors will be used to measure the effects of one factor upon another.
Results/Feasibility and Contingency

Surveys and interviews for the proposed research are still taking place. Currently, a total of 5 interviews have been transcribed and 1 focus group. There are a total of 81 responses to the survey. Results will be computed and analyzed in the coming weeks, mostly for the purpose of having more data from the male demographic.

The timeline for the proposed research is a basic outline with room for possible changes. By using a mixed method approach, the analysis has room to be flexible for varying results. As mentioned, my hopes are to make connections between economic factors and reproductive decision-making, but I am prepared to make adjustments if data indicates no clear correlation. Realistically, because of time restraints, there may be a smaller sample size. In the event that this occurs, the sample size will be reduced to a common demographic, most likely couples who have children, or mothers, exclusively. This more focused sample would help to increase the accuracy of any trends within the entire sample size, in the event that a large sample number cannot be acquired in a timely manner. If data trends indicate factors other than economic are more prevalent in the decision making process, I am prepared to make adjustments and write about what correlations are found, if any.

References

Crosignani, P.G. (2010). Europe the continent with the lowest fertility. Human reproduction update, 16(6), 590-602.


