

Non-Mormon Fertility in Utah: Evaluating Theories about Exposure to the Influence of the Mormon Majority's Fertility

Conrad Hackett, The University of Texas at Austin

A study of fertility intentions among Mormon and non-Mormon high school girls in Utah around 1980 found that non-Mormon girls in Utah had higher fertility intentions than similar girls in the rest of the country. However, the authors of the study were reluctant to attribute the slight differences to Utah residence and associated exposure to high Mormon fertility. Now that this cohort of women is approaching the end of their childbearing years, I evaluate differences in fertility between non-Mormons in Utah and non-Mormons elsewhere. Social influence and religious market theories predict higher completed fertility among the non-Mormons in Utah compared with non-Mormons elsewhere. However, other theories and research suggest no increase in non-Mormon fertility in Utah because non-Mormons in Utah define themselves in contradistinction from the Mormon majority and its practices, including high fertility.

Introduction

There are many theories about how social influences determine individual fertility and how regional religious composition influences the aggregate fertility of a religious minority. This paper reviews these theories and then considers an interesting case study—the fertility of non-Mormons in Utah. This case is of particular relevance due to an earlier study that found intended fertility around 1980 of non-Mormon girls in Utah was slightly higher than intended fertility of non-Mormon girls in the rest of the country. The authors of that study were unwilling to make broad claims based upon their results because the observed differences were small. This study tests whether non-Mormon fertility for this cohort has indeed been higher inside Utah. I discuss how the results accord with various theories about regional, religious, and social influences upon fertility.

Discussion of relevant theories

Social influence theories

The full paper includes a discussion of recent literature about social mechanisms that transmit fertility-related attitudes and behaviors.

The minority group status hypothesis

The minority group status hypothesis, as advanced by Goldscheider and Uhlenberg (1969), argues that marginalized minority groups will generally have lower fertility than majority groups as they work to overcome discrimination and assimilate socioeconomically. Goldscheider and Uhlenberg contend that among minority groups with a pronatalist ideology, fertility rates will remain high relative to the majority group.¹

¹ Specifically, Goldscheider and Uhlenberg (1969) argue that minority group status has an effect upon fertility independent of the characteristics of the minority and majority group. They argue that “the insecurities of minority group membership operate to depress fertility below majority levels when (1)

Many studies have tested this hypothesis, often focusing on Catholics in various environments.

There are challenges to using the minority status hypothesis for explaining fertility in the Catholic, mainline Protestant, and evangelical Protestant traditions. Even though each of these traditions is a religious minority in parts of the country, including Utah, it is probably not appropriate to characterize any of these traditions as a socio-economically marginalized minority group (Park and Reimer 2002; Smith and Faris 2005; Wuthnow 1988).

Religious market share and religious commitment

An alternative framework for considering the relationship between religious composition and behavior related to religious commitment is the religious economy perspective. This framework is perhaps the most debated innovation in the sociology of religion over the last 25 years. The central claim is that religious competition raises the overall level of religiousness in an area. Although many studies claim to affirm or refute the model, almost all of them suffer from a mathematical flaw that invalidates their results (Voas, Crockett, and Olson 2002). A related claim about market share and commitment seems to be generally accepted. "Other things being equal, small religious minorities will be more vigorous than will firms with a large local following. Thus, for example, Roman Catholics will be more active the less Catholic their community" (Stark and Finke 2000: 219). According to this model, referred to hereafter as the religious market share model, members of a religious group will manifest more signs of religious commitment when their group is a minority than when it forms a majority or plurality.

The mathematical foundation of the religious market share model was recently discussed by Olson (2008), who finds that a religious group's population share in an area is related to the average commitment level of members. This is due to the mathematical relationships between large and small groups. The flow of members out of and into relatively small groups tends to increase average commitment levels of that group. Those who leave have lower commitment than those who stay and those who join have higher commitment than existing members do.

If fertility is related to religious commitment, and religious market share influences religious commitment, it is likely that religious market share could influence the fertility of a group. However, analysis of the consequences of religious market share typically focuses on outcomes other than fertility. For example, Stark (1998) argues that Catholic commitment is higher in dioceses and states with lower percentages of Catholics in the population than in dioceses and states where Catholics are more pervasive. At the dioceses level, Stark finds a negative correlation between the percent Catholic in dioceses and rates of ordination, seminarians, priests, and conversion per 10,000 or 100,000 Catholics in the area. He also finds higher rates of lay deacons, which he construes as a measure of innovation, in those regions with higher rates of priests (and low proportions

acculturation of minority group members has occurred in conjunction with the desire for acculturation; (2) equalization of social and economic characteristics occurs, particularly at middle and upper social class levels, and/or there is a desire for social and economic mobility; and (3) there is no pronatalist ideology associated with the minority group and no norm discouraging the use of efficient contraceptives" (Goldscheider and Uhlenberg 1969: 372). It is unclear what thresholds are necessary in terms of group size, status, and pronatalist ideology for the minority group status effect to take place.

Catholic). Contrary to what might be expected, lay deacons are relied upon more heavily in those regions where the church is relatively strong (as measured by the rate of priests) and not in those regions experiencing the greatest priest shortage (the areas with large proportions Catholic).

The influence of total religious adherence upon fertility

In the religious market share model, the market share of a particular religion is related to the behavior of adherents. In addition to this effect, the overall religious adherence level in a community may influence behavior. One discovery of a behavioral outcome varying with overall religious adherence emerged because of disputed findings. Hirschi and Stark (1969) found that religious commitment was not related to the delinquency of teenagers in Richmond, California. However, when others studied the relationship between religion and delinquency in more religious parts of the country, they found that teenage religious behavior was negatively associated with delinquency (Burkett and White 1974; Cochran and Akers 1989; Higgins and Albrecht 1977). The disputed findings were initially framed as a debate about whether or not religion and delinquency are related but by accident of the locations where data emerged for various tests, a pattern of geographical difference emerged. Using High School and Beyond data, Stark (1996) eventually demonstrated that the negative correlation between church attendance and having trouble with the law is substantial and significant in the East, Midwest, and South, neither substantial nor significant in the West and of moderate strength and significance in the mountain region between the zones both geographically and statistically. He summarizes, "Religious individuals will be less likely than those who are not religious to commit delinquent acts, but only in communities where the majority of people are religiously active" (1996: 165).

While the relationship between teenage delinquency and religion varies across regions, other relationships between religion and behavior are consistent across region. Church attendance is related to alcohol abstinence in the last 30 days across regions for non-Catholics. Stark suggests that this is related to the historical legacy of alcohol abstinence among Protestants being reflected in lower rates of alcohol consumption among Protestant parents (1996). It is not clear whether the fertility of active religious adherents should correlate with overall levels of religious adherence, following the pattern of teenage delinquency, or if the fertility of active adherents is independent of overall religious adherence levels, following the pattern of teenage alcohol consumption.

Since previous studies link fertility and religious adherence on the individual level, it seems likely that this relationship will hold when aggregated to the county or state level. *For a given area, the higher the concentration of religious adherents, the higher the anticipated aggregate fertility.* This prediction could be true simply due to a compositional effect, since having more of a group expected to have above-average fertility should, on average, raise fertility. It is also possible that in an area with a high concentration of religious adherents, the fertility patterns of this population could have at least a small positive effect on non-adherents.

Research on Mormon Influence in Utah

Although the religious market share model predicts that majority religions will not command high levels of religious commitment among adherents, there are exceptions to the model. Mormons are a majority of the population of the state of Utah yet Mormon religious commitment in Utah is higher than the commitment of Mormons and non-Mormons in other states. The high religious commitment of Utah Mormons seems to influence other religious groups in the state because these groups have higher levels of giving and participation in their Utah congregations than in their non-Utah congregations (Stark and Finke 2004). One manifestation of Mormon religious commitment is high fertility (Heaton 1986; Thornton 1979). Mormon fertility, like Mormon religious commitment in general, may influence non-Mormons in Utah. The only study on this topic compares the expected fertility of Mormon and non-Mormon high school senior girls in Utah, using survey data collected in the late 1970s or early 1980s (Toney, Golesorkhi, and Stinner 1985).² The Mormon girls expected an average of 4.4 children and the non-Mormon girls expected 2.5 children. In contrast, 18-19 year old women in the 1980 Current Population Survey expected 2.1 children and young women in the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth expected 2.4 children. The authors of the study say, “Although the fertility expectations of Utah’s non-Mormons are somewhat higher than those of women in the nation, the differences are too slight to argue that residence in Utah influences fertility” (Toney, Golesorkhi, and Stinner 1985: 463). While it is clear that the Mormon girls in this Utah study had much higher expected fertility than their non-Mormon counterparts did, this study does not rule out the possibility that Mormon fertility may boost non-Mormon fertility in Utah. Patterns of completed fertility may vary from the patterns of expected fertility reported by high school students and furthermore, different patterns may currently prevail than were observed over two decades ago. The small difference between the expected fertility of non-Mormon teenagers inside and outside Utah around 1980 may have become a larger difference in completed fertility now that this cohort is reaching the end of its childbearing years. I anticipate that the fertility of non-Mormons in Utah has in fact moved closer to the Mormon fertility pattern and away from national averages. Utah’s high levels of religious commitment and concentration of high parity families have probably helped the surveyed non-Mormons come closer to achieving their 2.5 child intent than the non-Mormons in the NLSY79 came to achieving their 2.4 child ideal.

Mormons and non-Mormons in Utah

Approximately 66 percent of people in Utah are Mormons, including a Mormon majority in 26 of the 29 counties in Utah and a concentration of at least 80 percent Mormon in 10 of those counties (Flake 2004).

The divide between Mormons and non-Mormons is widely recognized as a source of tension in Utah. Members of each group make efforts to accommodate the other group but there is strong group identity for each group that reinforces the divide between them (Egan 2001).

Data

² The authors do not mention when their survey was administered.

Analysis of fertility among Mormon and non-Mormon households is based upon seven waves of the Utah Health Status Survey (2001, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2006, 2007, and 2008). The total sample size is over 20,000 adult respondents. Comparison with non-Mormons in the rest of the country is based on analysis of the General Social Survey and the NLSY79.

The Utah Health Status Survey does not ask about total completed fertility but it does include a question about children in the household under 18 as well as follow-up questions about the relationship of the relationship of all household members to the respondent. The analysis in this paper compares mean children in the household for women age 30-54 who are non-Mormon in Utah compared with non-Mormons elsewhere.

Results

The full paper contains full comparisons between non-Mormon in Utah and non-Mormons elsewhere. I also consider variation within regions of Utah by concentration of Mormon population.

Burkett, S. R. and M. White. 1974. "Hellfire and Delinquency - Another Look." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 13:455-462.

Cochran, J. K. and R. L. Akers. 1989. "Beyond Hellfire - an Exploration of the Variable Effects of Religiosity on Adolescent Marijuana and Alcohol-Use." *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 26:198-225.

Egan, Dan. 2001. "The Unspoken Divide." in *The Salt Lake Tribune*. Salt Lake City.

Flake, Kathleen. 2004. "The Mormon Corridor: Utah and Idaho." in *Religion and Public Life in the Mountain West: Sacred Landscapes in Transition*, edited by J. Shippis and M. Silk. Walnut Creek: Alta Mira Press.

Goldscheider, C. and P. R. Uhlenberg. 1969. "Minority Group Status and Fertility." *American Journal of Sociology* 74:361-372.

Heaton, T. B. 1986. "How Does Religion Influence Fertility, the Case of Mormons." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 25:248-258.

Higgins, Paul C. and Gary L. Albrecht. 1977. "Hellfire and Delinquency Revisited." *Social Forces* 55:952-958.

Hirschi, T. and R. Stark. 1969. "Hellfire and Delinquency." *Social Problems* 17:202-213.

Olson, Daniel V. A. 2008. "Why Do Small Religious Groups Have More Committed Members?" *Review of Religious Research*.

Park, J. Z. and S. H. Reimer. 2002. "Revisiting the Social Sources of American Christianity 1972-1998." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 41:733-746.

Smith, Christian and Robert Faris. 2005. "Socioeconomic Inequality in the American Religious System: An Update and Assessment." *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 44:95.

Stark, Rodney. 1996. "Religion as Context: Hellfire and Delinquency One More Time." *Sociology of Religion* 57:11p.

—. 1998. "Catholic Contexts: Competition, Commitment and Innovation." *Review of Religious Research* 39:12p.

- Stark, Rodney and Roger Finke. 2000. *Acts of Faith : Explaining the Human Side of Religion*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- . 2004. "Religions in Context: The Response of Non-Mormon Faiths in Utah." *Review of Religious Research* 45:293.
- Thornton, Arland. 1979. "Religion and Fertility: The Case of Mormonism." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 41:131-142.
- Toney, Michael B., Banu Golesorkhi, and William F. Stinner. 1985. "Residence Exposure and Fertility Expectations of Young Mormon and Non-Mormon Women in Utah." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 47:459-465.
- Voas, David, Alasdair Crockett, and Daniel V A Olson. 2002. "Religious pluralism and participation: Why previous research is wrong." *American Sociological Review* 67:212.
- Wuthnow, Robert. 1988. *The Restructuring of American Religion: Society and Faith Since World War II*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.