NEWS FROM THE CAMBRIDGE GROUP FOR THE
HISTORY OF POPULATION AND SOCIAL STRUCTURE

The Representativeness of Family Reconstitution

Although the method of family reconstitution has transformed the kind of information which parish registers can be made to yield, there are often considerable doubts about the representativeness of this new knowledge about population in the past. The first area of doubt springs from the fact that the laboriousness of family reconstitution means that very few parish registers can be analysed in this degree of detail. The question therefore immediately arises of how far the experience of a small group of parishes was typical of the country as a whole. The French have attempted to get round this problem by drawing a random sample of parishes from each of their regions, to be used as the basis of regional and national estimates. Unfortunately this solution is impossible in England because the comparatively low quality of registration means that only a small proportion of registers are in fact suitable for family reconstitution. Since a fully representative sample is out of the question we have therefore adopted the strategy of deliberately selecting for reconstitution parishes which are in contrasting social and economic situations. For example, we have reconstituted a market town in a mixed farming area, a large market town in an arable area, an isolated seaboard parish, and a northern pastoral parish at high altitude. In this way we hope to be able to see whether fertility, mortality and nuptiality varied with different social and economic circumstances, and we are now concentrating on registers which regularly give occupations so that we can observe differences between social and economic groups directly. Indeed, a study of the dimensions of variations in demographic behaviour may be more illuminating than the compilation of summary national statistics.

A second question which often arises in connection with family reconstitution is whether the "reconstitutable minority" is representative of the parish community being studied. The point which often gets obscured in discussion is that there is no single "reconstitutable minority", for different calculations impose different periods of observation, and as a result rest upon very different proportions of the events recorded in the register. For example, most children feature in the calculation of an infant mortality rate, because the family is only required to be in observation for one year after the
birth of each child. On the other hand relatively few women contribute
to some of the stricter measures of completed marital fertility, for
they have to be in observation from birth until their 45th birthday.
It is in this context of the measurement of fertility that the greatest
doubts have been expressed about the representativeness of family
reconstitution, especially in the form of fears that that the fertility
of migrant women, who are excluded from the calculations, may have
differed in some way from the fertility of the less mobile women, on
whose experience the fertility rates are based. But migration has a
rather different impact on family reconstitution, depending on whether
it occurred before or after marriage. If the family moves after
marriage this means that it passes out of observation, and this usually
also means that the date of the end of the marriage is unknown. We
are trying to get some idea of the importance of this kind of migration
for fertility measures by tabulating all our fertility calculations twice:
once for these migrant women whose date of end of marriage is not
known, and again for the group of women who do not migrate after
marriage and for whom the date of end of marriage is known.

In England, however, migration was an age-specific event, and
migration after marriage was much less frequent than migration before
marriage.(1) If a woman moves at marriage and spends her fertile
life in a parish other than the one in which she was born, she will
almost certainly be excluded from all age-specific fertility calculations
based on the register of the parish to which she moves at marriage.
This is because her baptism will be recorded elsewhere, in the register
of the parish of her birth, and since marriage registers rarely give
age at marriage, and burial registers rarely give age at death before
the 19th century, her age at the dates of birth of her children will
therefore be unknown.

Although, a large proportion of all married women in a parish are
excluded in this way, it does not follow that age-specific fertility rates
for English parishes in the past are based entirely on a minority of
immobile couples. Firstly the English parishes which have been
reconstituted are both large in extent (Colyton, Devon, for example
comprises 7,000 acres, and Hawkshead, Lancashire 19,000 acres) and
contain a number of separate communities. Much of the migration
of young people was local, within a distance of 5 miles,(1) and the
registers of the parishes which have been reconstituted include a
number of people who migrated this distance yet remained within the
parish boundaries. It is unlikely that the fertility of other young
people who migrated similarly short distances, but across the parish
boundaries, was for that reason different.
But it would be a mistake to assume that migrants over longer distances are altogether excluded from fertility calculations. For although on balance a couple was more likely to reside in the birth-place of the husband than the birth-place of the bride, cases in which the bride was a native and her husband came from a considerable distance are quite common in English parishes. These cases are included in age-specific fertility because the wife's age is known, and it is easy to compare the fertility of these marriages, in which the husband was mobile, with those in which both partners were immobile. Unfortunately, the lack of age information in marriage and burial entries in English registers means that the fertility of the reverse case of an immobile husband and a migrant bride cannot be observed. But, it is a little difficult to see why the fertility of marriages where the bride moves some distance should be different from the fertility of marriages either where the husband moves some distance, or where neither partner moves very far. This, in any case, can be checked by taking groups of parishes and comparing those who move from one parish to another with those who have all their vital events recorded in a single register. Unfortunately, it is rare to find a group of adjacent parishes all of whose registers are suitable for family reconstitution. There was however, in England, one minority group of young people who migrated very long distances to cities, pre-eminently London, as early as the 16th century. This group was undoubtedly distinctive in its migratory patterns, but whether its members were also different in their fertility, before they were killed off by the higher urban mortality rates, is unfortunately a question which the size of the cities concerned and the distances covered make very difficult to answer.

A third problem of representativeness in family reconstitution is the more general one of the adequacy of parish registers as recordings of vital events. Considerable suspicion has been thrown on English parish registers on this score. The worst cases of defective registration have been found in the rapidly growing urban areas in the early 19th century, in which population far outstripped both the organisation and the enthusiasm of the official church. But it would be foolish to expect that the national estimates of under-registration which have been calculated for the early 19th century, and which are heavily weighted by these large centres of population will apply to small rural parishes at the same date, let alone at the time of the Reformation. Unfortunately, before the 19th century, it is exceedingly difficult to check on the completeness of parish registration, although two attempts have been made. Hollingsworth
has thrown suspicion on the adequacy of baptismal registration in the early 18th century on two grounds: firstly because a tax on births failed to yield as much as a contemporary (Gregory King) forecast that it should, and secondly because the number of baptisms is lower than would be predicted by stable population theory given some assumptions about other demographic parameters at the time.\(^{(3)}\)

But these grounds are at least as contentious as the baptism registration they purport to evaluate. In the first case, Gregory King's forecast of the amount the tax would yield may have been unreasonably high. However that may be, contemporary Treasury evidence certainly shows that far more tax was assessed than was actually paid, and in any case the amount assessed is scarcely a test of the completeness of the parish registers, because the assessment was based on a special registration system of vital events and not on the parish registers. The second ground is plausible only if the assumptions about other demographic parameters are correct and stable population conditions in fact obtained. At present these are all guesses, and to reject a system of registration on these grounds is as much an act of faith as is accepting it at its face value. Glass has used the alternative taxation system of registration of vital events referred to above to estimate the total number of baptisms and burials omitted from a number of parish registers in London and Southampton at the end of the 17th century, but the estimation technique assumes that the chances of being included or excluded from each system of registration are independent.\(^{(4)}\) This is unlikely to have been the case, and since registration in one system may well have decreased the chances of people bothering to register in the other, Glass' estimates of the proportion of baptisms and burials omitted from the parish registers are probably too high even for these two towns.

In the absence of any general estimates of the adequacy of parish registers it is obviously prudent in English conditions to scrutinise carefully both the register and the community for signs which suggest defective registration before embarking upon the labour of family reconstitution. Fortunately, family reconstitution is fairly proof against some of the more common kinds of omission. In England, a relatively late age of baptisms, which on the whole increased during the 18th century, coupled with the levels of infant mortality prevailing, meant that a number of children died before they could be baptised.\(^{(5)}\) This is an embarrassment to studies which are based on the simple frequency of baptisms and burials, but in family reconstitution special steps are taken to recover children who were buried, but for whom there were no entries in the baptism registers. The effect of non-
conformity is somewhat similar to that of migration: conversion to another religious group leads to a family passing out of observation in the parish registers. But the calculation of demographic rates from reconstituted families carefully defines the end of observation of a family so that passage out of observation does not lead to bias. The dangerous migrants are those who return to the parish, thereby giving a false impression of continuous residence. Unfortunately, English registration does not allow the same kinds of checks to be made as are possible in France, so the extent to which family reconstitution is deficient because of temporary migration is unknown. Fortunately, however, this problem is minimal with "religious migrants" for very few non-conformists returned to the Anglican fold. We have used non-conformist registers to investigate the effect of non-conformity on demographic rates calculated from a family reconstitution of the parish registers in Colyton in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Although non-conformists comprised about 6% of the population at this period, the operation of the normal rules of observation ensured that age-specific fertility rates, for example, were understated by the negligible amount of 4 per thousand.

A fourth difficulty with the representativeness of the results of family reconstitution lies in the small numbers of families which can be used for some of the calculations. This problem is particularly severe when it is necessary to subdivide the individuals on the family forms into a number of categories (for example, by date period, age-at-marriage, sex, first or later marriage), for this often reduces the number of family forms used in any one category to very small figures indeed. This is the reason why we have so far reconstituted only very large parishes, and it is worth while bearing in mind when considering reconstituting a register that if the population is much under 1000 only fairly summary demographic calculations can be made. At all events it is important that whenever the results of family reconstitution studies are presented, the number of families on which each figure is based should also be stated. Otherwise it is all too easy to mislead the reader into accepting general conclusions based on ludicrously small numbers of families. Indeed, wherever possible statistical confidence limits should be calculated for simple estimates, such as average ages at marriage: and where differences between periods or groups are being discussed, the size of these differences should always be tested statistically to ensure that they are not chance effects due to the very small numbers of families involved.

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NOTES


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