

Combining Qualitative and Quantitative Methods: A Case from Family Demography

Introduction

Over the past four decades, we have witnessed massive changes in Western family patterns, characterised by a decline in marriage and an increase in divorce and out-of-wedlock fertility. Aside from representing quantitative changes, these changes also represent qualitative changes, i.e. changes in the meaning of family life to children and adults. While marriage some decades ago signaled the start of living together and having children,

today, many couples live together and have children long before they eventually formalize their relationship.

Cohabitation represents a new form of union, and family demographers are struggling with the place of cohabitation in the family formation process.

While quantification is a major strength of demography, it may also

contribute to a theoretical weakness within the discipline by imposing constraints on the demographic imagination (Knodel, 1997). This might be the case in particular in the face of the changes mentioned above.

The point I am trying to make in this brief paper is that that by complementing traditional demographic research activity with more qualitatively oriented research, we might be able to give richer and better explanations of the phenomena we are studying, e.g. union formation. The structure of this paper is two-fold. In the first part, I address the use of qualitative research in family demography more generally and, in the second part, I refer to a multi-method study I conducted on cohabiters' marriage preferences (Reneflot, 2006).

Barriers to the use of qualitative research

Aside from the very nature of demography, which suggests a strong quantitative focus, two elements may serve as barriers to the use of qualitative research: What counts as valid knowledge and what resources are available? Some argue that quantitative research and qualitative research represent distinctive epistemological positions, that is, different approaches to what should count as valid knowledge (Bryman, 1988). This conception implies that quantitative research and qualitative research are irreconcilable. Another and, to my view, more productive position, is that quantitative and qualitative research represent distinctive approaches to social research (Bryman, 1994). This means that we acknowledge that they are distinctive and that they are appropriate to different kinds of research



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problems. Furthermore, quantitative research and qualitative research hold different strengths and weaknesses. According to this position, the decision to use quantitative research, qualitative research or to combine the two is based on technical considerations.

There might also be more trivial barriers to the use of qualitative research. Given the strong quantitative dominance, most demographers do not have adequate training to perform qualitative studies. The lack of training might also lead demographers to overlook the option of conducting a qualitative study. They are simply not used to posing qualitative research questions or to considering a qualitative research strategy. Finally, most researchers are constrained by time and money. The decision regarding research strategy is often a trade-off between what one ideally would like to do and what is possible within available time and money parameters. Given limited resources, choosing an unfamiliar research strategy might be perceived as both too costly and uncertain.

The rationale underlying more use of qualitative research in family demography

In general, qualitative research is characterized by focus on process and meaning, close contact between researcher and subject, a more unstructured and flexible research design, and by the production of rich data. Qualitative research is considered to be particularly useful in studies of unexplored or new social phenomena. Hence qualitative research may prove a useful supplement to family demographers in their studies of modern family patterns, e.g. cohabitation. Qualitative studies may shed light on people's expectations when they enter a cohabiting union. They may also reveal information about the process of moving in together and agreeing on the more practical aspects of their union, such as the organization of a couple's finances and housework, etc. This applies to everything which can provide important feedback on the understanding of cohabitation as a union form and which can give direction to further research.

Qualitative research includes a wide range of research designs, data collection methods, and methods for analyzing data. In-depth interviews can be a useful supplement to survey and register data (the main data sources in demography). In-depth interviews are characterized by a focus on biography, personal experiences and subsequent outcomes. They are usually undertaken in private, providing an opportunity to explore sensitive or personal topics that people might not want to speak about publicly or have recorded on a questionnaire. In-depth interviews are usually based on an interview guide delineating the topics to be dealt with in the interview. The aim is to follow the interest and experiences of the subject and to allow them much more control over the interview than is possible in a questionnaire. The idea is that such an approach will allow for new ideas to emerge that may not even have been considered by the researcher in advance.

Knodel (1997) suggests three benefits of in-depth interviews. First, they confirm or disconfirm the findings of surveys. Answers to closed-ended question are not always easy to interpret. Although perhaps trivial, qualitative research can confirm or disconfirm whether questions did actually tap what they were intended to tap and hence add credibility to surveys. Second, in-depth interviews can help researchers gain a fuller

understanding of the meaning of survey findings. In-depth interviews encourage respondents to express more elaborate opinions or accounts on behavior addressed in a survey and to place it in a context. Third, qualitative research can help provide explanations for relationships being studied. The more elaborated answers from in-depth interviews can provide more insight into the phenomena being studied and contribute significantly to explaining them, at least intuitively, giving direction to the collection of more appropriate quantitative data.

A multi-method study of cohabiters' marriage preferences

Little is known about what cohabiters expect to gain by formalizing their relationship. The objective of this multi-method study (studies combining qualitative and quantitative methods) was to contribute to the understanding of the factors behind the transition from consensual unions to marriage, employing a gender perspective. The assumption was that a marriage will only be formed if both partners consider it an advantage. Of course, the man and the woman do not necessarily draw the same advantages from marriage, and the overall advantages for each of them may not be equally strong.

The quantitative part of the study was based on the Omnibus survey 1996, where 617 cohabiters, among others, were asked about their plans to marry. They were given 12 different reasons for hesitating to marry. These reasons were derived from a theoretical framework consisting of the following four arguments that are likely to be involved in the decision-making process: Quality of the existing relationship, quality of the relationship if formalized, expenses and work associated with a wedding, and normative pressure (this latter argument was not addressed in the Omnibus survey). The quantitative analysis found that men are more hesitant to marry than women (both among childless cohabitants and cohabiting parents), and that men and women give different reasons for hesitating to marry. For example, childless men worried about the quality of the relationship, and that a marriage would be economically disadvantageous. Men may fear that a more traditional provider role is expected in marriage than in consensual unions. Among those who were parents, women hesitated because they feared the work and expenses associated with a wedding.

The qualitative part of the study consisted of in-depth interviews with four cohabiting couples. The idea with the qualitative interviews was to delve deeper into cohabitants' views on the differences between marriage and cohabitation (e.g. organization of economy, division of labor, and whether this organization could be an incentive to favor cohabitation over marriage), and to address the normative pressure argument. The in-depth interviews confirmed, gave nuance to and expanded the result of the quantitative analysis.

For one, they provided support for the idea that people expect the value of marriage to be different from that of a consensual union with the same partner. For example, men's possible fear of a more traditional provider role, to which reference was made, was confirmed. Some informants felt that, as cohabiters, they could divide the household expenses equally and keep what was left of their income to themselves, while in marriage they

would be expected to pool their incomes. Thus, a change from cohabitation to marriage may be expected to be a disadvantage, especially for men.

Second, the fact that more women than men attach more weight to the wedding argument does not necessarily mean that they appreciate the ceremony and the festivities less. At least, our in-depth interviews revealed very positive attitudes among the women to being a bride, and to gathering family and friends for a big wedding celebration. However, it may well be that a woman has a more realistic view about how much it takes, perhaps for her in particular, to give such a party.

Finally, the in-depth interviews provided information on whether cohabiters experience normative pressure towards marriage (an aspect not covered by the Omnibus survey). The impression from the in-depth interviews was that this pressure indeed was a reality, although it was rather mild, and largely restricted to the period after the birth of the first child. Women in particular reported that they were exposed to some mild persuasion to marry and that they were uncomfortable with it. Men, on the other hand, voiced very strong resistance against being prevailed upon to marry, like this man:

I notice that my brothers and sisters are getting married one by one and I see the photos on the wall at my parents' house. In a way I get the hint in the open space left there....then I think "what the hell!" as I'm really obstinate about things like that.....can't I have a first-class family without all that glitter and finery?

Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have argued that even though family demography is mainly a quantitative discipline, it could benefit from more use of qualitative research. This could prove especially useful in the face of the dramatic changes in western family patterns over the past four decades. By including qualitative research, we can improve our demographic imagination and be able to give richer, better explanations for these changes.

References

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