

**What Can We Learn from Variation in Fertility Preferences?
Effects of Social Context on Elite College Women in the United States and Turkey**

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Short Abstract: This study analyzes variation in reported fertility preferences to investigate how social influences may affect demographic behavior. We use an experimental survey design to compare how fertility preferences of women enrolled in elite universities in the United States and Turkey are affected by prompts designed to bring to mind their own financial limitations. We compare results by country to investigate how priming effects interact with broader cultural context. Priming with financial limitations has no significant effect on desired fertility in the U.S. sample, but significantly increases desired fertility in the sample of Turkish women. We discuss possible explanations for this surprising finding, and present a supplementary study (results forthcoming) designed to shed light on the meaning of this finding. Our study demonstrates how reports of fertility preferences are influenced by immediate contexts, and how this process can vary across national contexts.

Introduction

This study addresses recent calls by prominent demographers for empirical demographic research to use more realistic models of the effects of culture and beliefs on demographic behavior, drawing on advances in psychology and other social sciences (Bachrach 2014; Bachrach and Morgan 2013; Thornton et al. 2012; Johnson-Hanks, Bachrach, Morgan and Kohler 2011). We use an innovative experimental survey design to assess contextual variation in reported fertility preferences, in order to examine how thought and behavior are shaped by social and cultural contexts. This study contributes to a more nuanced model of how culture operates to affect fertility-related behavior, one with implications for our understanding of social influences on fertility behavior, as well as for the measurement of fertility preferences. It begins to address the question of how chronic or context-independent desired fertility is: to what extent are fertility preferences deep-seated, cultivated across years of experience and exposure to cultural models, and to what extent can they change based on the real-life contexts that people experience? These contexts may have the potential to influence key decisions by shaping individuals' interpretations of the situation and the consequences of their actions particularly in uncertain, conjunctural moments (Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011).

We focus on the relationship between desired family size and financial limitations. Financial hardship and perceptions of financial uncertainty can have important implications for fertility, especially fertility preferences. Economic downturns have been linked to lower fertility (Sobotka et al. 2010), and economic shocks are related to lower certainty of future fertility (Testa and Basten 2014). Our study contributes to these literatures by empirically examining how these domains are related in the minds of women enrolled at elite colleges. We focus on this subpopulation because we expect returns to work to be greatest for these women, raising the stakes of potential tradeoffs between work and family.

We compare women at highly selective universities in the U.S. and Turkey, using the international comparison to explore another dimension of contextual variation: the broader cultural context—in this case the national context—within which issues like career aspirations and financial limitations are interpreted. Although total fertility rates in the two countries are similar, their recent trajectories are quite different (Figure 1). Turkey is a particularly interesting case for comparison, as fertility there is characterized by a large demographic divide that maps onto regional (Isik and Pinarcioglu 2006) and ethnic (Yavuz 2005) divisions. Furthermore, fertility rates have been politicized in Turkish public discourse recently, highlighted by debate over the prime minister's public remark in 2009 that every family should have at least three children. The Turkish case allows us to compare college women in a country with a relatively low female labor force participation rate (29% in 2012) and very high marriage rates (<10% of women age 30 or older never married in the 2003 DHS).

FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

This study asks whether thinking about financial limitations changes reports of desired fertility. If these topics lead college-enrolled women to report lower desired fertility, this may be evidence that they perceive conflicts between their preferences for family life and other goals and priorities in life. We expect that changing the context of reports of fertility preference with these prompts will reveal that reported preferences change depending on the social context of the report. To the extent that such changes in social context affect reported preferences, scholars should examine how exposure to different social contexts affects reported fertility preferences, and how social structures organize exposure to those contexts that affect fertility preferences.

Research Design

In order to examine variation in survey responses about fertility preferences, our study uses random assignment of respondents to conditions that prompt respondents to think about different social frameworks, and compares their responses to the responses of a control group that received no social framework prompt. Each respondent was randomly assigned to a treatment or control condition. For respondents in the treatment condition, the first section of the survey prompted respondents to reflect on their own financial limitations. This section was omitted in the control condition. In the second section, respondents reported their fertility preferences: desired family size and a choice among four combinations of work and family size: no children and a full-time job, one child and a three-quarter-time job, two children and a half-time job, or three children and no job. A third survey section collected demographic characteristics and attitudinal measures. The second and third sections were identical across all versions of the survey.

We compare responses to the questions about fertility preferences vary the treatment and control groups. The experimental design of the survey, in which respondents were randomly assigned to condition, allows us to assess the causal effects of the treatment condition on desired fertility, preferences for career-family tradeoffs, and desired age a first birth.

Hypotheses

In the financial limitations treatment group, respondents answer questions about a time they have had to save up to buy something, and a time they have not been able to buy something because of the cost. We expect that respondents prompted to think about their own financial limitations will report lower desired fertility than respondents in the control group because considering financial limitations should make salient constraints relevant to childbearing.

Sample

U.S. survey respondents were drawn from the population of undergraduate students at a highly selective private university in the Mid-Atlantic region. Turkish respondents were drawn from undergraduate students at a highly selective state university in Istanbul. Importantly, our hypotheses are most relevant for college-educated women, so although this is a non-representative population, a representative sample is not required to achieve the study's goals. Our main goal is to study processes that affect reports of fertility preferences, not to make population estimates. Response rates were about 30%; sample size is 130 U.S. women and 426 Turkish women. Descriptive characteristics of both samples are presented in Tables 1 and 2.

Results

As shown the first column in Table 1, results for the U.S. sample show no significant effects of priming with financial limitations. Results for the Turkish sample, in the second column in Table 1, show significant *positive* effects on the desired number of children, and significant *negative* effects on desired age at first birth—both in the opposite direction of the expected effect. There was no effect on preferred work/family tradeoffs in the Turkish sample.

TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Discussion

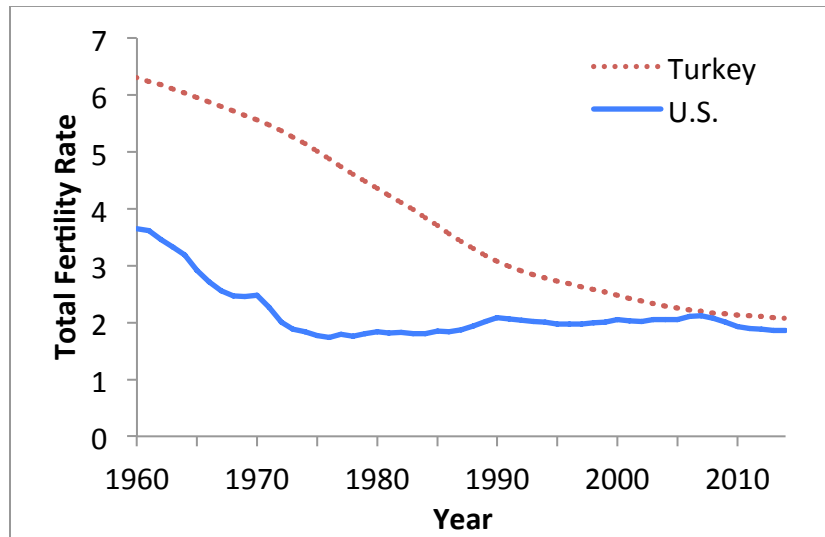
There are several possible explanations for the surprising findings presented above. One possible explanation for the results in Turkey is that respondents believe that children provide support in old age, so that priming thoughts of financial limitations leads them to desire more

children, to provide more support. If respondents were less than fully confident in the country's economic prospects and pension system, they might see children as the best retirement plan. However, we are cautious about this interpretation for two reasons. First, the literature on the perceived value of children in Turkey has shown that survey respondents are increasingly likely to support views of children as psychological support, rather than economic support, and this change is strongest among the more-educated (Kagitcibasi and Ataca 2005). Second, our study included focus groups with students at this university before we administered the survey, and costs of childbearing were a major concern in these focus groups. Therefore, it's not obvious that the idea of children as economic support would be relevant to our sample in Turkey. However, this finding lends support to the idea that we may be learning different information from studying cognitive associations than we do from explicit surveys or focus groups. We will test the relationship between attitudes toward the economic value of children and the effects of our experimental intervention, repeating the experiment at an elite Turkish university in a supplemental study that includes survey questions about the value of children as psychological or economic support after the experimental module (results forthcoming).

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Figure 1. Total Fertility Rates for Turkey and the U.S., 1960-2015



Source: World Bank World Development Indicators

Table 1. Effect of treatment condition on dependent variables, by country. Linear regression without sociodemographic control variables.

	U.S.	Turkey
Desired fertility	-0.23 (0.22)	0.29 * (0.13)
Work/family tradeoff	-0.15 (0.17)	0.11 (0.10)
Desired age at first birth	0.16 (0.42)	-0.84 * (0.33)
N	130	246