Unintended Pregnancy and Abortion in Comparative Perspective

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My 10 minutes... A view from “20,000 feet”

• Four Points
• A Little U.S. Trend Data

• Four points # 1

Controlling the timing/number of births is important for individuals, families, and populations. Births have externalities/consequences .. and thus are targets of social control and individual strategizing.

• Four points # 2

The task of “birth control” is not easy! Unintended pregnancies occur. Their prevalence varies across populations. The U.S. has high levels of unintended pregnancy – roughly ½ of all pregnancies in the U.S. are unintended at conception… and this has been true for 40 years!

• Four points # 3

Abortion = Prob (UnPreg) * Prob (Abort/UnPreg)

Part A of understanding variation in abortion is variation in unintended pregnancy.

Part B: By definition an unintended pregnancy is a “conjuncture” (a combination of circumstances or events usually producing a crisis, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary). How can the conjuncture be resolved?

• Four points # 3 contid

How can the conjuncture (unintended pregnancy) be resolved?

a. suicide
b. infanticide / maltreatment
A live birth does not guarantee appropriate care and nurturing.

These are five-month old girl-boy twins. The mother–in-law took the girl at birth and bottle fed her. The son stayed with his mother.

• Four points # 3 contid
  • How can the conjuncture (unintended pregnancy) be resolved?
    a. suicide
    b. infanticide / maltreatment
    c. infant abandonment / adoption (historical)

Foundling wheel at the “Ospedale degli Innocenti” in Florence.

Kertzer (1993; Table 5.1) counted 1163 “wheels open in early 19th century” Italy – almost all in the north.

Less than ½ of abandoned infants survived a year. “Established to prevent infanticide, the foundling homes became slaughterhouses themselves.” (Kertzer 1993:138. Sacrificed for Honor)

Contemporary adoption seems a much more promising option for 21st Century babies... but it is a rare choice for a U.S. woman to “give her baby up” for adoption (at birth to nonrelatives). Why? Clearly viewed as unnatural/inappropriate in the U.S. context.

Maybe 10,000 (?) U.S. babies adopted per year by nonrelatives... Roughly a 2 or 3 per 1,000 births (Remember 50% of pregnancies are unintended!)

• Four points # 3 contid
  • How can the conjuncture (unintended pregnancy) be resolved?
    a. suicide
    b. infanticide / maltreatment
    c. infant abandonment / adoption
    d. abortion
    e. legitimating (shot gun) marriage/union
    f. single parenthood
    g. (and for the “married”) a couple can have a birth earlier than planned or a family size larger than planned
• *Four points # 3 contd*

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• *Four points # 4*

These are not desirable options! (And this is an exhaustive list!) A “good choice” is the “best choice” -- choices are constrained by ideological and material aspects of the culture and by the circumstances of the pregnant woman.

Thus abortion varies dramatically across place, time and social location.

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**U.S. Trend Data**

Allan Guttmacher Institute

http://www.guttmacher.org/

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**Abortion Trends over the last 40 years**

http://www.guttmacher.org/pubs/sfaa/mississippi.html
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