



香 港 中 文 大 學
社 會 研 究 中 心

The Learning of Population-related
Norms: Some Problems for Research

Pedro Ng

SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE
THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY
OF HONG KONG

Suggested citation:

Ng, Pedro. 1975. *The Learning of Population-related Norms: Some Problems for Research*. Hong Kong: Occasional Paper No. 53, Social Research Centre, The Chinese University of Hong Kong.

THE CHINESE UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

SOCIAL RESEARCH CENTRE

THE LEARNING OF POPULATION-RELATED NORMS:

SOME PROBLEMS FOR RESEARCH

BY

PEDRO NG

July 1975

This paper was originally presented at the Conference on Population Socialization held on December 16-21, 1974, at the East-West Center, Honolulu, Hawaii, sponsored by the East-West Population Institute of the East-West Center.

THE LEARNING OF POPULATION-RELATED NORMS: SOME PROBLEMS FOR RESEARCH

Introduction

The purpose of this working paper is to provide some ideas concerning certain possible problem-areas for research on what may be called "population socialization." As far as research activity is concerned, population socialization is still a little explored territory. Whereas the population research literature is voluminous and the psychosocial aspects of, for instance, fertility have been given considerable attention (see Palmore, 1973), not much understanding has been generated regarding the processes whereby an awareness is acquired of population and population-related ideas which have consequences for an individual's demographic behavior. A comparison with studies on political socialization (e.g., review by Greenstein, 1968), which are fairly well developed, would confirm how little has been done in the population socialization field.

Socialization is primarily a learning process through which an individual acquires the various social skills, values, and norms of his social group or society. Just as we speak of political socialization where such learning is relevant for the individual's political behavior and his functioning in the political system, so we may speak of population socialization insofar as this learning also consists of influences on the individual's demographic behavior, such as when he enters marriage and how many children he desires. For the purposes of this paper, I shall confine my discussion to three major aspects of this learning process: (1) the content of what is learned, (2) the agents from whom the content is learned, and (3) the circumstances under which the learning takes place.

Norms, as principles of behavior, will be considered in this paper as the main substance of what is learned. I shall propose the distinction of several broad types of population-related norms that may serve as a starting point in research on population socialization.

Norms

A norm is essentially a standard or principle of behavior that is socially acceptable. It defines or prescribes the right thing to do--although often a range of behavior is allowed--under a particular situation. Such definition or prescription is typically shared to some extent by others to give the norm a social significance in terms of providing certain sanctions to enforce conformity though this varies depending on the situation because although norms do exercise some influence on behavior, they do not necessarily determine behavior completely. An understanding of an individual's behavior, political or otherwise, must seek to deal with the norms, some of which are more influential than others, that are relevant to him and that have been learned and accepted by him as guidelines for his responses.

I am using the term "norm" somewhat loosely, without stating precisely under what conditions a standard of behavior is a "norm" and when it becomes a "value" which may be considered as a "normative principle" or a line of "normative reasoning." The distinction may be made that values are relatively basic and general considerations of what is desirable while norms are explicit and specific rules of conduct. This distinction is, however, by no means entirely clear-cut

since it hinges on the degree of specificity of the conduct in question. Nevertheless, it is still reasonable to say that both values and norms have essentially the same kind of significance for behavior in that one class of behavior is endorsed rather than another since, it may be argued, a norm presumably exemplifies a value (see Blake and Davis, 1968). Therefore, whether one should call a certain standard of behavior a "norm" or a "value" seems to matter relatively little when our chief concern here is the process by which such standards are learned. Thus, a preference for sons and a desired family size of three children can both be considered as norms in a broad sense since they both share the property of motivating the individual (or couple) to acquire a certain form of fertility behavior. The important question for us is: How are such norms acquired in the first place? Before we can discuss this question, however, let us consider some general types of population-related norms.

Population-related Norms

It may be useful to classify population-related norms in terms of the closeness or directness of their bearing upon demographic behavior. Thus, the distinction may be made between what may be called population-relevant norms and population-specific norms. The former include principles of behavior that indirectly affect demographic behavior. An example is independence or being self-reliant and accepting personal responsibility for one's own actions since it may eventually be related to the decision to form a nuclear family and to practise family planning. Population-specific norms involve expectations

more directly related to demographic behavior, such as the norm of late marriage and the desire to have a small number of children.

If we limit our attention to those norms which relate to fertility behavior, another way to classify population-related norms is to distinguish between pronatalistic norms or those that tend to encourage high fertility and antinatalistic norms or those that tend to encourage low fertility.

Combining these two criteria of classification produces four types of population-related norms, as shown in the accompanying table.

	Population-relevant	Population-specific
Pronatalistic	1	3
Antinatalistic	2	4

Thus, there are certain norms that are related to fertility behavior in a relatively indirect way, some of which tend to encourage high fertility and others low fertility. There are also norms that are more specifically pertinent to fertility behavior, some of which again favor high fertility and others low fertility. By way of suggestion, some possible candidates for each of the four types of population-related norms are as follows:

1. Population-relevant and pronatalistic.--Fatalism or the belief that events are determined by fate regardless of whatever man may do is an orientation which leads to passivism and a feeling that

planning of any sort is unnecessary and inappropriate. Presumably, family planning or any action to control births is at best accepted with the least enthusiasm and at worst rejected. As one Chinese saying goes, "Heaven begets, Heaven nurtures," there does not seem much that man can do or worry about the number of children that come into a family.

2. Population-relevant and antinatalistic.---The norm of independence, as mentioned earlier, is of course related to many kinds of behavior. Insofar as it emphasizes doing things on one's own and assuming personal responsibility for one's actions, some of its implications for fertility behavior may be antinatalistic, such as the decision to disregard "traditional" pronatalistic values that may still exist and the wife's decision to work after marriage thus possibly postponing childbearing or reducing the number of children desired. In addition, the trend of late marriages in some societies suggests that, when the family system in general no longer easily provides assistance and support from kins, young people may want to establish their financial independence through working for some time before considering marriage. Besides independence, the norm of achievement, so prevalent in modernizing and industrializing societies, also has antinatalistic implications particularly if achievement is partly defined in terms of the quality of life attained which may improve with fewer children.

3. Population-specific and pronatalistic.--Family size norms that expect a relatively large number of children and norms that contain a preference for children of either sex (e.g., preference for boys) are pronatalistic. Norms that favor early marriage also fall into this category.

4. Population-specific and antinatalistic.--Family size norms that expect a relatively small number of children (two, for example), norms that provide no special preference for children of either sex, and norms that favor late marriage are all antinatalistic.

Having proposed to classify population-related norms this way, let me point out that the fundamental problem for research is probably the identification of the norms themselves. The examples given above merely serve to suggest some possible ones. It seems to me that much has yet to be done, especially in indentifying population-relevant norms because they are more remotely related to fertility behavior and yet they may be important linkages in preparing the individual to learn and accept the more direct population-specific norms. Thus, a highly independent and achievement-oriented person may be more easily persuaded to desire a small family than one who is otherwise.

While the classification scheme as proposed may be an oversimplification, it serves as a heuristic device to stimulate further thinking about population-related norms. The distinction between population-relevant and population-specific norms is not always easy and clear since the difference may be merely a matter of degree.

Thus, the norm that "woman's place is at home" (or at the office, for that matter) is probably more population-specific than the norm of independence in general and apparently less so than any family size norm. Similarly, the distinction between pronatalistic and antinatalistic is not free of difficulties, particularly when the norm in question is basically population-relevant and not population-specific. Thus, the norm of independence may have antinatalistic implications for a person under one given set of conditions but pronatalistic implications for another person under different conditions. At any rate, the purpose of this classification scheme is to draw the attention of the researcher to a wide variety of norms that bear upon fertility behavior in different ways. Some of them may involve special processes in the individual's learning experiences. The processes involved in the learning of both population-relevant and population-specific norms may provide useful insight for our knowledge of population socialization, insight which is badly needed for explaining, for instance, why couples of different social strata have different fertility levels.

Another reason for making distinctions among various population-related norms is that such norms may be different for different groups in society. Poorly-educated members of older generations, for example, as contrasted with members of younger generations who are better-educated, may be more attached to norms that are pronatalistic. In identifying these norms, therefore, the researcher should also identify the groups holding them. Inasmuch as an

individual has multiple group memberships, some groups are likely to extend more influence on him than do others. To make the situation more complex, non-membership groups may also exert an influence on the individual's behavior. It is not surprising, then, for individuals to experience normative conflict when different groups have different or even contradictory interpretations of a given norm. Such conflict is experienced by, for instance, a person of the Catholic faith who is forbidden by his Church to practise contraception but who believes the necessity of contraception as do his occupational colleagues. How such conflicts are resolved is an interesting topic for study because it would have to deal with not only the groups competing for the person's loyalty but also his previous socialization experiences that contribute to his tendency to accept one norm rather than another.

In this connection, where different and conflicting norms may coexist, the element of internalization in norm learning becomes crucial. Learning of norms, to be effective, must consist of three basic components: (1) to know about the norms, including their meanings as applied to actual situations and the differences among them, (2) to internalize the norms or to accept those norms as one's own the significance and validity of which have been established in some personally meaningful way, and (3) to act in accordance with the norms. This does not mean that having known and internalized a norm always guarantees conforming behavior (see, for example, Goode, 1960), but it does suggest that unless an individual accepts a norm

as binding on himself to some extent, there is little or no motivation on the part of the individual to act in accordance with the norm.

It follows that for each of the four major types of population-related norms, the following questions ought to be asked: (1) Where do young people learn about the norms? (2) How do they come to accept them as viable and valid guidelines for action? The first question concerns socialization agents while the second has much to do with the circumstances under which socialization takes place. Since these two aspects are in fact closely connected, they will be considered together in the rest of this paper.

Agents and Circumstances

The family and the school are two major socialization agents for the young. But their structural characteristics, such as membership, age composition, visibility among children, and experiences possible, are quite different from each other so that certain norms are more easily learned in one setting than in the other (Dreeben, 1968).

So far as population-related norms are concerned, a very important research question to ask is: What population-related norms are given an opportunity to be learned in the school and in the family? The opportunity may arise in a rather deliberate circumstance, as happens in the classroom where the teacher tells his pupils about the importance of doing independent work in their assignments, or in the home when the father explains to his son how he should allocate

his time in completing school assignments as well as his home duties. The opportunity may also arise in a non-deliberate circumstance in which the learning is very casual and even hardly noticeable by both the socialization agent and the person being socialized. Such learning takes place abundantly in the pupil's informal interaction with his peers and his teachers in the school and in the child's casual conversation with his parents or siblings at home.

The distinction between deliberate and non-deliberate learning is important because, with respect to the school and the family as socialization agents, it draws the researcher's attention to (1) the normative outcomes of schooling as a total experience which extends beyond what goes on in the classroom, and (2) the rich potential in family life for the acquisition of norms and behavior which develops often imperceptibly. Furthermore, when other socialization agents, such as organizations and the mass media, are taken into consideration, much of the learning of norms tends to be even more subtle and non-deliberate.

Precisely how the learning of population-related norms takes place in the school, the family, and through other agents is a topic that has yet to be studied. Sigel (1965), in discussing the learning of political values, has suggested several forms of "incidental" political learning, such as observation, overhearing adult conversation, and actual life experience. Jennings and Niemi (1968a) have indicated that parents are more likely to emit cues through expressing opinions on issues and topics that are salient and concrete rather than abstract. Dreeben (1968) has also presented a persuasive case

demonstrating how children in school draw out the governing principles of conduct (such as independence and achievement) through a series and a variety of tasks, constraints, sanctions, and opportunities for generalization of ideas and investment of emotions. Some of the norms that are considered to have implications for political behavior and for social life generally may have implications for demographic behavior as well. Thus, studies in political socialization and socialization in the school should serve as useful guidelines in shaping studies of the learning of population-related norms.

The circumstances in which learning takes place actually can be considered as consisting of those elements which contribute to that part of learning which involves knowing about norms and those which contribute to the acceptance of norms. The identification of the norms to which an individual is deliberately or non-deliberately exposed in a given setting, as I suggested above, deals largely with the "know about" dimension of learning. That is, we may separate out and describe the conditions in the school, the home, or other social setting in which an individual gets to become aware of certain principles of behavior. At the same time, we should examine whether these conditions contain or lead to certain mechanisms that eventually make the learned norms become part of the individual's internalized set of behavior standards. Such mechanisms may be sanctions that teachers and parents use to encourage acceptance of and conformity with norms. They may also be satisfactions that the individual obtains through participation in group life in the school or elsewhere,

or a personal understanding, through conscious discussion with trusted others, of the desirability of acting in one way rather than another.

It must be pointed out, however, that internalization is only a positive form of acceptance since the latter is a variable. The norm in question may be simply treated indifferently or rejected altogether. Thus, an important research problem is: what learning mechanisms in what situations contribute to a high or low degree of acceptance of what population-related norms? Such mechanisms may differ, for example, in the case of population-specific norms from those in the case of population-relevant norms. For someone who is not yet married, for instance, to accept a certain family size as good and desirable must be supported by convictions resting partly on non-personal experiences since he cannot yet properly visualize the benefits and limitations attending such a family size other than those which he can more or less anticipate indirectly. To accept the idea of planning ahead for one's day-to-day affairs, as an example of a population-relevant norm, may be related to a whole array of personal experiences that bear more directly on the usefulness of planning. Experiences, personal or non-personal, are differentially tied with various socialization agents and settings. The same unmarried individual may, through his work experiences, learn to accept the desirability of planning without necessarily accepting the norm of a family size of four even if his work-mates espouse such a norm. It follows, then, that the degree to which a norm is accepted in a way reflects the relative effectiveness, with regard to the

learning of the norm in question, of a learning situation or setting as compared with another. What parents may fail to impress on their children as a principle of behavior may be transmitted more adequately by the school or by the mass media. Thus, for example, children of parents who are themselves disorganized in their daily life may learn to obey discipline and order in the classroom and to plan things ahead through participation in organized group activities.

Implicit in the foregoing discussion on agents and circumstances of norm-learning is the time element. Individuals may be exposed to certain population-related norms fairly early, and others later, in their life cycle. Besides, at different points in the life cycle, the salience of various socialization agents are likely to differ. The research problem stated earlier can then be modified to read: What learning mechanisms in what situations at what stage of the life cycle contribute to what degree of acceptance of what population-related norms?

It may be that certain norms are not learned at all until the individual has reached a certain stage in his development or has entered into association with some particular groups (e.g., occupational groups) or both. The norm governing the "ideal" age at marriage possibly belongs to this type. It may also be that the acceptance of a given norm undergoes drastic change after a long period of time. Some tradition-oriented Chinese in Hong Kong, for example, have long not questioned the desirability of a large family until they have reached the point where they realize that this could no longer be

appropriate for living in an industrial society or be practiced by the next generation.

Summary and Discussion

Norms as principles of behavior are a very important part of what is learned in the socialization process inasmuch as this learning more or less determines the degree to which an individual will cope with his social environment successfully. In the area of population socialization one of the basic endeavors that should be undertaken is the study of the ways in which an individual learns population-related norms or norms that have a bearing on the individual's demographic behavior. I have in this brief paper proposed a four-fold classification of population-related norms depending on (a) whether the norm is more directly related to fertility behavior (as one main form of demographic behavior) or more indirectly related, and (b) whether the norm is largely pronatalistic or antinatalistic. This of course is a simplified scheme and is restricted to fertility-related norms, but it is intended to facilitate the focus of research on types of population-related norms that may have commonalities in terms of mechanisms and processes in learning. I have also pointed to the need for identifying what norms are learned in different socialization settings. The circumstances in which norms are learned can be deliberate and conscious or non-deliberate and imperceptible. Whatever circumstances they may be, an even more important research problem is the study of the mechanisms responsible for the acceptance of norms on the part of the learner, since unless there is some degree

of acceptance of a principle of behavior as valid and desirable the individual lacks the motivation to act accordingly although, at the same time, acceptance does not guarantee conformity. Furthermore, since a person's social contacts and experiences vary greatly at different stages in his life cycle, the study of the learning of population-related norms would have to incorporate an investigation of the patterns of norm-learning at different phases of the life cycle. Does the learning progress from the more general to the more specific? What population-related norms are learned in the elementary school years and in the secondary school years? What about college years? What kind of learning takes place after marriage? These and other similar questions all suggest the importance of following the learning process through time--as the individual enters and leaves school, and subsequently other realms of social life--in order to tackle the basic question: Precisely how does population socialization take place?

In comparison with the area of political socialization, the study of population socialization poses certain difficulties. Among these is the task of identifying those topics which are relevant to the learning of population-related beliefs, norms, and attitudes. While the manifestations of political orientation and behavior seem to be fairly numerous and relatively clearly identifiable (see, for example, Almond and Verba, 1965; Easton and Dennis, 1967; and Jennings and Nieme, 1968b), those pertaining to demographic behavior tend to be less so. Also, while there is such a thing as the political

institution incorporating, among others, the government and the citizenry, population per se is not a social institution and therefore does not contain entities comparable to political figures, political parties, and elections which constitute rather clear-cut objects for the generation of beliefs, feelings, and attitudes. Nevertheless, demographic behavior does occur in the context of social institutions, such as marriage, the family, and even politics, e.g., (population policy), and thus it embodies generalities and standards of what is socially appropriate and desirable for which learning is highly instrumental in bringing about patterns of behavior. Furthermore, on the basis of the interconnectedness of social institutions, the case can be made that much of politically relevant learning (as distinct from specifically political learning) which occurs in various settings has implications for demographic behavior also. Consequently, certain politically relevant norms, such as independence, efficacy, and respect for individual rights, are also to some extent population-relevant norms. In other words, it would not be incorrect to say that a part of a person's political socialization is at the same time a part of his population socialization.

The population-relevant norms as mentioned in my proposed classificatory scheme raise a very substantial issue that needs careful study. How such norms are eventually related to fertility behavior is not totally clear although some theoretical justification can be brought to bear on the possible linkage. Empirical work is necessary to ascertain, for example, the consequences of learning to be independent and efficacious as they relate to the preferences and decisions

opted for in family planning. Research of this nature could throw important light on the background factors in the individual's learning experiences which lead to differentials in demographic behavior.

I have not in this paper explicitly touched on those aspects of population socialization which concern the learning of population-related facts (e.g., population size and growth, social problems related to population, methods of birth control, etc.). These are of course important in forming an individual's "population awareness" which is in fact associated with the learning of population-related norms, especially those that are population-specific. For the individual who is learning about and learning to accept a norm, the notion of what behavior is desirable and appropriate often has to be established on certain facts so that some justification can perhaps be derived for behaving in one way rather than another. Moreover, the learning of norms also involves the generation of feelings (of acceptance or rejection, of like or dislike, etc.) which form the basis for attitudes. Thus, for example, a person's knowledge of the utility of contraceptive methods and his acceptance of a small family size norm together may produce a favorable attitude toward family planning and hence a strong motivation to achieve his desired family size. The study of the learning of population-related norms has therefore a rather central place in understanding population socialization. It is at least a focal point leading to an examination of the whole lot of mechanisms and contexts responsible for determining demographic behavior. Our present knowledge in this area is so limited that much work has yet to be done.

REFERENCES

- Almond, Gabriel A., and Verba, Sidney.
The Civic Culture. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1963.
- Blake, Judith, and Davis, Kingsley.
 "Norms, Values, and Sanctions." In Robert E.L. Faris (ed.),
Handbook of Modern Sociology. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1964.
- Dreeben, Robert.
On What is Learned in School. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1968.
- Easton, David, and Dennis, Jack.
 "The Child's Acquisition of Regime Norms: Political Efficacy."
American Political Science Review, 61(1967), 25-38.
- Goode, William J.
 "Norm Commitment and Conformity to Role-Status Obligations."
American Journal of Sociology, 66(1960), 251.
- Greenstein, F. I.
 "Political Socialization." In D.L. Sills (ed.), The International Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences. New York: Cornell College-Macmillan, 1968, pp. 551-555.
- Jennings, M. Kent, and Niemi, Richard G.
 "The Transmission of Political Values from Parent to Child."
American Political Science Review, 62 (March, 1968), 169-184.
- Jennings, M. Kent, and Niemi, Richard G.
 "Patterns of Political Learning." Harvard Educational Review, 38 (Summer, 1968), 443-467.
- Palmore, James A.
 "United States" in Henry P. David and Sung Jin Lee (eds.),
Social and Psychological Aspects of Fertility in Asia.
 Proceedings of The Technical Seminar, Choonchun, Korea,
 November 7-9, 1973.
- Sigel, Roberta.
 "Assumptions about the Learning of Political Values." In
 Roberta Sigel (ed.), Political Socialization: Its Role in the
 Political Process. Annals of the American Academy of Political
 & Social Science, Vol. 361. Philadelphia: The Academy, 1965.