

**“Alice in Wonderland”: Lessons from a Study of Fertility Intentions among Well-Educated Couples in Belo Horizonte, Brazil<sup>1</sup>**

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**ABSTRACT**

In the Brazilian context of below replacement fertility, the objective of this paper is to question the traditional questions that result in the measure of fertility intentions. Data come from fieldwork carried out in 2013 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil: 62 short questionnaires, followed by 62 in-depth interviews with 31 well-educated couples (wives 35-44 years-old) with 0-2 children. According to the traditional DHS questions about fertility preferences, many respondents have less children than they desire. However, the in-depth interviews reveal that several of them are not unhappy or dissatisfied with their actual number of children and do not wish to try to reach their desired fertility goal. In fact, they perceive the questions to be about social norms regarding ideal family size, rather than their own individual preferences. Therefore, the measures of desired number of children may be “Alice in Wonderland” – may not mean what researchers originally had in mind.

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<sup>1</sup> This paper is part of Carvalho’s PhD dissertation, originally written in Portuguese. The translation to English is still very preliminary, for which the authors deeply apologize.

## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

It is becoming more common, also in the Latin American context, the emergence of women who want to have more children than they actually have (Wong, 2009). In Brazil it has been no different, considering that, for 2006, the average ideal number of children declared to all Brazilian women 15-49 years was 2.1 children and fertility observed was 1.8 children (Berquó, Lima; 2008), what would be a significant proportion of couples with fewer children than they actually have and that would probably be unable to implement their reproductive preferences.

This discrepancy between the declared ideal number of children and fertility observed would be an indicator of restrictions preventing individuals to implement their fertility preferences. In this case then, the decision to have fewer offspring than would be the desired result of pressure exerted by the economic and socio-cultural context in which this decision is made, and therefore a claimant phenomenon of attention and public policy (ECLAC, 1998 )

However, there are severe criticisms made to the indicators that are available on the desired / ideal family size, which limits the study of this subject. Despite the increased importance on reproductive preferences for understanding low fertility and knowledge of the recurring problems in the quantitative data, most research on this topic is limited to cross-sectional data and closed questionnaires. Thus, there is a gap that is not known if in fact the data on implementation of reproductive preferences contained in the searches like DHS (Demographic Surveys Healthy) adequately reflect the preferences and satisfaction with fertility behavior of people (Thomson, 1997; Morgan, King, 2001; Santelli et al 2003).

In this sense ask: have fewer children than desired is synonymous with dissatisfaction with the behavior of fertility? Was the reproductive right of the couple to decide when and how many children they would like to have missing? Or simply a stay would be the norm in desires for children and fertility behavior modification, due to the consummation of an option by a couple of nulliparity and / or few children against other interests? Regardless of the response, investigations that advance these discussions are necessary.

This study aims to analyze if indeed women are having fewer children than desired, from a comparison of quantitative and qualitative data in order to get items to unveil the relationship the gap between desired fertility and the observed and satisfaction with the behavior of fertility, in order to discuss the problems of the traditional questions that result in the measure of fertility intentions

### **METHODOLOGY**

Data come from fieldwork carried out in 2013 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil: 62 short questionnaires, followed by 62 in-depth interviews with 31 well-educated couples (wife 35-44 years-old) who had 0-2 children. Was also applied to respondents a mini questionnaire containing questions similar to those

used in the DHS about reproductive preferences in order to compare the quantitative to qualitative data and foremost question the validity of the indicators used. The recruitment of respondents was taken the convenience criterion that was used the 'snowball' technique, where participants suggest others to be interviewed for consideration. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and interpreted from the content analysis.

## RESULTS

This analysis was based on the traditional indicator of discrepancy of fecundity (fertility desired versus fertility realized) and also by more abstract measures on the relationship between satisfaction, happiness and fertility. This is observed in the TAB.1 that on average the desired total number of children was 2.22. Without intent to generalize, this average agrees with the universal idea of an ideal family size of two children (Bongaarts, 2002; Hagewen & Morgan, 2005), and this average was 2.1 and 2.3 for men and women respectively. Noting the differences by parity, the data show that there are clear differences in the ideal number of children according to the parity of the couples. Childless couples had an average of close to 1.6 ideal children with almost no difference between men and women, while among those with a child the average ideal number was 2.1, and among these couples wanted women on average less children than partners. Finally among those who already had two sons average of desired children was the highest, 2.94 children, in which case the women were higher than their ideal spouses of children.

Answers	childless couples		one child couples		two children couples		Generally Average
	she desires	he desires	she desires	he desires	she desires	he desires	
In the women's questionnaire, she said ...	1.58	1.42	1.82	2.36	3.11	2.56	2.17
In the men's questionnaire, he said ...	1.5	1.58	1.64	2.45	2.56	2.78	2.27
Overall average desired fertility	1.58		2.14		2.94		2.22

Source: Questionnaire applied to respondents

In TAB. 1 the most individuals and couples were interviewed with a discrepancy of fertility, as among those without children desired average was 1.58 children among those with one child the desired behavior would be 2.14 children and those with two children was the desired fertility of 2.94 children. That is, all had fewer children than the declared ideal. Intuitively many would say that these couples were dissatisfied with their current fertility and therefore, this conclusion would put them in an unfavorable situation. However, one can not simplify this result, firstly because this indicator suffers from several methodological problems, and secondly, because the sample was selective and highly educated people. Therefore it is necessary to observe the qualitative data, to understand to what extent this discrepancy between desired fertility and conducted, in fact, leads to dissatisfaction on the part of

the individual and their behavior observed in fertility. From the following excerpts, we can better discuss these results.

Childless couples would be those that would be closer to the situation, besides being with a discrepancy, would also be unhappy, since only two couples reported not want to, in fact, children. Most, however, said he would like to have at least one. However, a major dilemma seems to happen is that the vast majority of couples who have no children and who reported an ideal two or three in the mini-questionnaire made it very clear in the interview that if they have children, they will have at most one child. That is, despite the existence of a desire for two or more, this number is not real, since they know they have not reached this number because the current intention is much smaller. This, then, masks the real dissatisfaction of these couples, when calculated simply based on the measure of discrepancy would be much higher than it actually is.

[And those three you said, think you will have?] "I do not think so. Today I think the following if I have one, thank God, great. "Fernanda, childless, 37 years (declared an ideal for three children but want to have one)

"Actually I think it will be only one children. She talks a lot in one. We don't know if we will be time to have another not because we're postponing. "Alberto, childless, 33 years (declared an ideal for two children but want to have one)

"Well, the future we plan we build family, have a couple kids, because four, that number I spoke, is a number like Alice in Wonderland". Daniel, childless, 44 years (said that ideally was four children but want to have two)

"I doubt [will be the third son] only for the financial question and the question of leaving because I get very depressed when I have to go back [to leave the child with his parents when she need to go back to work]. Karine, two children, 38 years

This mismatch between the desired number of children and couples who really want to have also occurred among couples who have one and two, because even though they will not have three or four children, they declare the very high ideal number, but consciously they know that this number will not materialize. In addition, in these cases, especially among couples with one child, the discrepancy does not seem to be as related to dissatisfaction, since, for some parents, the second would be more to a company for the first child who really, to realize a desire to self-comply.

"If a turn and talk like that, if I could have, I dunno, if I won on the lottery today I would have three, but rationally and financially I will have two." Bruna, one child, 37 years (Said an ideal of 3 children but just want to have a second child)

"For he [son], not by me [having another baby]. For me I'm happy. Had a son, I love, I love, and he already filled. "Lara, one child, 37 years (declared an ideal of 3 but want to have two)

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Prior quantitative analysis seems to confirm that there is, by analyzing traditional indicators preferably a strong predominance of the phenomenon of discrepancy fertility, because most couples interviewed stated desire more children than they actually had. However, from in-depth interviews, it was found that an important part proved to be totally satisfied with the current situation of fertility, except for the group of childless couples, which the majority wished to have at least one child, but even this group's intentions for children were much higher than they really intended to have. As a consequence, it was this group of couples in which most manage to identify the relationship between having a discrepancy and really be unhappy with the behavior of current fertility. For the remaining cases, have fewer children than declared ideal has not translated into dissatisfaction with the behavior of fertility, since the number of children declared desired, for most respondents, was not he who imagine that they have because they do not unwilling to carry out this desire.

This is because it was found that fertility intentions are formulated from experiences of family and social context that individuals were created, in this sense, the ideals declared by children at the present time, are influenced by subjective norms that accompany fertility regimes of the past, where the number of children taken was much higher and, consequently, the number of siblings. The biggest problem in this comparison of children desired/observed is time lag of these indicators. That is, even in this fairly educated group, and said to the forefront of the second demographic transition, there seems to be a stay of fertility preferences of the past, where individuals tend to follow the pattern of desire for a higher fecundity, indicating a certain 'inertia of the norm 'in relation to reproductive preferences, which has the consequence that high discrepancy observed and desired fertility. However, despite this permanence of desires for children the same does not happen with the actual behavior of fertility, because the same current restrictive influence on socioeconomic factors. And so, it is possible that the stated desire by respondents to be established without all the factors that may contribute to them not to take effect are taken into account.

Importantly, even with problems in its measurement, the discrepancy in fertility is a present and growing phenomenon. Considering that, increasingly, the fertility in Brazil and Latin America will decrease, it is expected, due to an increase in the gap between desired and realized fertility - and that this subject will receive further attention by public policies family. The indicators currently used are shown inefficient and controversial, intensifying the emergence of new questions about its efficiency to capture satisfaction with fertility behavior. It seems, then, that the findings discussed in the literature on fertility unsatisfied by the lack of children, based on data from the DHS type, relate much more to a discrepancy in fertility than exactly one unsatisfied fertility by childlessness. Furthermore, it will be important to understand the different forms of this discrepancy on individuals, so that you can appraise this issue as a social problem that requires effective public policies.

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