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“Managing natural reproduction”
Paper proposal for the 2006 PAA

Short abstract

This paper analyzes how three concepts of natural reproduction—“natural fertility,” “natural family planning,” and “natural childbirth”—incorporate human intention and intentional action. The paper first demonstrates that natural fertility treats nature as antithetical to intentional action, whereas natural childbirth requires maximally conscious decision-making to manage and maintain the “naturalness” of reproduction. In natural family planning, the role of human intention is more ambivalent. The paper then argues that these different stances toward intentional action in the domain of reproduction arise, almost paradoxically, out of a single, remarkably coherent view of nature and culture: the natural underlies and predates the cultural; it is what is left when social or technological innovations are stripped away. What differs in the three representations of natural reproduction is the relationship between human intentional action and culture: for Coale, Henry, and their followers, intentional intervention in reproduction signaled the onset of culture; for Dick-Read, Kitzinger, Bradley and others, by contrast, intentional management of the birth process could prevent technological intervention, recapturing nature in the midst of culture. Natural family planning incorporates an additional interpretation of intentional action, that of hubris.

Longer abstract

Starting in the early part of the 20th century, demographers sought to identify what human fertility would be like “in the absence of intentional control.” This move was part of a broader intellectual interest in what characterized “modern” as opposed to “traditional” societies, and can be seen as well in the works of Durkheim, Weber, and Marx. In all of these works, traditional societies were represented as pre-rational in some way, whether because of the prevalent modes of social action, the mechanisms of social solidarity, or the lack of a “calculus of conscious choice” regarding childbearing. The concept of natural fertility became rapidly equated with pre-rational or pre-calculating fertility. In 1953, for example, Louis Henry defined natural fertility as “the fertility that a given human population would have if it made *no conscious effort to limit* births” and considered the opposite of natural fertility to be “controlled” fertility. Knodel (1983, Table 1) identified “deliberate stopping” with the “intent to limit family size” as the *sine qua non* of controlled fertility. Under this classification, natural fertility is necessarily neither deliberate nor intentional.

By contrast, the contemporary movements for natural family planning and natural childbirth treat natural reproduction and intentional action as entirely consonant, given the right kinds of intentions. In 1933, Grantly Dick-Read published “Childbirth without Fear,” a book that argued that “[t]here is no physiological function in the body that gives rise to pain in the normal course of health. In no other animal species is the process of birth apparently associated with any suffering, pain or agony” (page. XX). Thus began the “natural childbirth” movement, which advocates that women engage in maximally

conscious decision-making to manage and maintain the “naturalness” of reproduction, struggle with doctors to regain control of their own bodies and return to “traditional” methods of birthing. The Natural Family Planning (NFP) movement shares with the natural childbirth movement a focus on intentional decision-making to minimize technological interventions in reproduction. However, rather than emphasizing the womanliness of birth and the naturalness of women’s bodies, NFP focuses on the married couple as the natural unit of reproduction. The Couple-to-Couple League, a leading NFP organization, explains:

Couples worldwide are choosing Natural Family Planning (NFP) for its healthful and marriage-building qualities, as well as its usefulness to plan or postpone pregnancy. Many couples are also grateful to use a family planning method that is in harmony with their religious beliefs.

After describing the differing relationships between intentions/ intentional action and nature in the concepts of natural fertility, natural family planning, and natural childbirth, I will argue that all three rest on the assumption that nature is distinct from, and prior to culture—an underlying substrate over which a patina of culture may or may not form. This vision of the natural evokes either Rousseau or Hobbes, and may be related to mid-20th century concerns with modernity and the loss of nature (see Moscucci 2002). That is, although natural fertility and natural childbirth have diametrically opposed theories of the relationship between intentional action and nature, both share a similar representation of what is natural, and how the natural relates to the cultural.

The paper next argues that what differs in the three representations of natural reproduction is the relationship between human intentional action and culture: for Coale, Henry, and their followers, intentional intervention in reproduction signaled the onset of culture and the necessary end of nature. For Dick-Read, Kitzinger, Bradley and others, by contrast, intentional management of the birth process could prevent technological intervention, recapturing nature in the midst of culture. Natural family planning incorporates an additional interpretation of intentional action, that of hubris in the face of divine will.

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