Worlds Apart: Social Mechanisms of Contrasting Fertility in European American and Native American Populations on the Northern Plains

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Abstract
The purpose of this study was to explore the relationship between fertility and household economy on Montana's Northern Plains. Low fertility and outmigration in European American communities have led to dramatic depopulation of the region. At the same time, isolated Indian reservations in the area have grown in population due to high fertility and return migration.

A mixed methods research approach was used to explore the relationship between fertility and social acceptance of communal household economic strategies. Census data and birth records described differences in fertility and household economy between European American and Native American populations in six Plains Indian reservation counties; inferential tests demonstrated patterns of variation among fertility and economic variables in 37 rural counties. Qualitative ethnographic data were collected in two representative communities, one predominately European American and one predominately Native American, documenting individual beliefs and actions that reflected and reinforced community themes of ideal fertility.

Findings delineated value constellations that supported culturally specific fertility ideals. European American informants idealized delayed parenthood, childrearing within a nuclear family setting, household self-sufficiency, and avoidance of public assistance. In contrast, Native American informants idealized early parenthood, childrearing within an extended family setting, mutually dependent extended family households, and acceptance of tribal assistance without stigmatization.

Analysis of state and tribal TANF programs and teen pregnancy prevention initiatives illustrate culturally specific approaches to public policy that influence fertility behaviors. State and federal programs reinforce dominant culture ideals of delayed parenthood and nuclear family self-sufficiency; they pathologize Native American patterns of family formation by removing parenthood from the context of community. Some tribes have assumed administration of TANF and adapted the program in order to preserve traditional childrearing practices and maintain family-building systems.

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Plains Native Americans lived in both sedentary and nomadic communities. They farmed corn, hunted, and gathered, establishing diverse lifestyles and healthy diets. When horses arrived on the Plains along with the Spanish colonizers, or conquistadores, they disrupted agricultural norms and intensified hunting competition between Native American groups. Geographic and temporal setting: across the flatlands. The Plains region spreads to the east of the Rocky Mountains, up to 400 miles across the flat land of the center of the present-day United States. The Plains were very sparsely populated until entirely of Native Americans, the population now includes most ethnic groups from around the globe. These changes were instigated by substantial immigration from Europe population. The results make it possible to construct fertility measures for various subgroups of the population on the basis of nativity, occupation, literacy, geographic location, or wealth. Data on children ever born and Native Americans have the highest mortality rate of any U.S. minority because of U.S. action and policy. The biggest killers though were smallpox, measles, influenza, whooping cough, diphtheria, typhus, bubonic plague, cholera, and scarlet fever. All imported by the Europeans colonists. Smallpox was instrumental in killing the American Indians. The U.S. army followed suit and used the same method on the Plains tribal populations with similar success. Forced removal from homelands. American Indians felt comfortable with the environment, close to the moods and rhythms of nature, in time with the living planet. Europeans were quite different, viewing the earth itself as lifeless and inorganic, subject to any kind of manipulation or alteration.