

POLITICAL CORRECTNESS AND THE POPULATION PROBLEM

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[NOTE: In 1998 Ryerson founded the **Population Media Center** that since has become a major force for population stabilization in the developing world. “Mission Statement: The mission of Population Media Center is to improve the health and well-being of people around the world through the use of entertainment-education strategies, like serialized dramas on radio and television, in which characters evolve into role models for positive behavior change.” Bolding in article by S. Hurlbert, SDSU, 2017]

When I was a college student in the 1960s, I managed to take one course in psychology. **The only thing I can remember from Psych 101 is the research by Professor Ashe of Princeton University on tendencies toward conformism.** Professor Ashe would tell a classroom of students that he was going to conduct a study in visual perception and would hold up two objects, one clearly longer than the other. He would then ask each student, one by one, to state which object appeared longer from the student's vantage point in the room. In fact, every student in the room, with the exception of one individual, had been told before class by Professor Ashe to name the shorter object as looking longer. A hidden camera recorded the mounting distress on the face of the uninformed student over the fact that his perception was different from all of his classmates’.

By the time Professor Ashe called on that student for his answer, he was often in a heavy sweat and looking panicked. On occasion, a brave student would say that he hated to disagree with all of his classmates, but from his vantage point in the room -- perhaps it was just where he was sitting -- the longer item actually looked longer. The other students would stare at him as if he were a visitor from Mars. Then Professor Ashe would repeat the experiment with two different objects. More often than not, when it came time for the uninformed student to give his answer, he would play right along with his classmates and name the shorter object. Professor Ashe repeated these experiments over and over with different groups of students, with the same results.

We have all learned to a greater or lesser extent to conform with a large number of written and unwritten rules, customs and attitudes as a basic survival mechanism. **One of the rewards of conforming with others’ views and behaviors is public acceptance. One of the severest penalties humans impose on non-conformists is personal rejection.**

So it comes as no surprise that the public is influenced in its views on population -- or any other issue, for that matter -- by what the “experts” have to say.

The environmental movement of the late 1960s and early 1970s grew out of a combination of concerns by ecologists and activists about industrial pollution, traffic congestion and automobile emissions, loss of wildlife habitat through human encroachment, and unsustainable use of natural resources. These concerns spawned both the creation of the Environmental Protection Agency and activism around population issues that once were the province of demographers.

One of the early leaders in drawing attention to population issues was General William Draper, who advised President Eisenhower to include family planning in the U.S. foreign aid program and later went on to help establish the Office of Population at U.S.A.I.D. He also spearheaded the development of the first U.N. conference on population and the creation of the U.N. Population Fund to help finance work in the field.

Zero Population Growth, founded in 1968 by biologists Paul Ehrlich, Charles Remington and a lawyer named Richard Bowers, was, by 1970, reaching millions of people with the message, "stop at two." The message was carried to the American people by Paul Ehrlich, who appeared on the "Tonight Show" with Johnny Carson several times following the publication of *The Population Bomb*.

People working in provision of medical family planning services took note of the growing human concern with population. Planned Parenthood Federation of America adopted the moniker "Planned Parenthood-World Population," by which it would be better known until it switched back to primarily using PPFA in the late 1970s. In family planning clinics, some family planning providers started urging patients to limit family size. The women's movement questioned the traditional primacy of emphasis on childbearing for women and encouraged women who would like to enter the workplace outside the home to do so.

The public took note. Among other changes, the birth rate in the United States dropped dramatically during the early 1970s. By 1973, the fertility rate had fallen to replacement level -- the lowest it had been since the Great Depression. The pendulum had swung.

The first U.N. conference on world population in Bucharest in 1974 marked a new high point of global concern about population growth, with developed countries leading the cry for reducing growth rates and improving access to family planning services. General Draper led the U.S. delegation to Bucharest. Media coverage of the conference was extensive.

Announcing the breakthrough on U.S. birth rates, the National Center for Metropolitan Statistics issued a press release in the mid-1970s which mentioned that, given enough time, the remarkable achievement of replacement level fertility that had just occurred would lead to zero population growth. The news media picked up the story and ran headlines like "Population Problem Solved" and "U.S. Arrives at Zero Population Growth." No less a columnist than James Reston wrote a column in which he noted that the world still had many problems, but thankfully the population problem was over. The general public reacted with relief that a problem as serious as the population problem had been solved.

As the 1970s wore on, many medical service providers started to see some of the problems that could arise when a health care worker gave advice about family size to a patient. Imagine the reaction of a patient who is seeking medical help in achieving another pregnancy being told by a health care worker that she thinks the patient has had enough children. Some groups in the women's movement suddenly had a new cause -- to protect a woman's right to make her own decisions regarding her body and childbearing and not be harassed by zealous family planning workers. **What many may have overlooked is that in many developing countries, the husbands and male partners make all important decisions regarding family life, including the number and spacing of children.**

In a sign of the newly discovered sensitivity to patient autonomy, Planned Parenthood of New York City ran a public service announcement on radio that said essentially, "Have as many children as you want, and when you've had enough, come to us. Planned Parenthood." In its more refined version, this view, which has come to be predominant among those in the field of reproductive health care, is that a medical service provider should be neutral with regard to such personal goals as family size and should serve the patient by helping her achieve her goal -- whether it be increased fertility, child spacing or cessation of childbearing. Family planning service providers were coming to recognize that it is best to let the patient decide what is right for her, with information provided on her options.

At the same time, anti-abortionists started their drive to overcome the consequences of the 1973 Supreme Court decision on abortion. **Recognizing that concern with population growth was one of the reasons many people supported legalized abortion, the Right to Life movement evolved a strategy to cast doubt on the existence of a population problem.** This strategy has continued and has been joined by various elements of the conservative movement. Those ultra-conservatives' view was epitomized by an editorial in *Forbes* magazine by Malcolm (Stephen) Forbes, Jr. which basically claimed that population growth is a stimulant to economic growth and that slowing population growth would lead to economic stagnation. This led me to write a letter to the editor of *Forbes* (which the magazine chose not to run) suggesting that if his theory were true, Malcolm Forbes might be happier living in such outstanding economic powerhouses as Bangladesh or Nigeria, rather than the stagnant, unfortunate countries of Europe and North America.

In the 1960s and 1970s, attention of population watchers here and abroad shifted more to developing countries where population growth had been alarming, resulting in some cases in national populations doubling in little more than a generation. The U.N.'s first International Conference on Population in Bucharest in 1974 brought worldwide attention to some of the implications. In India soon afterwards, governmental alarm about galloping population growth led to family planning workers, acting under emergency powers declared by Indira Gandhi, rounding up many villagers for involuntary sterilizations. That excess caused a backlash which still is inhibiting effects there and elsewhere.

At the 1984 U.N. Population Conference in Mexico City, the United States, under the influence of ultra-conservatives and President Reagan, abandoned the leadership position it had taken in Bucharest, which unfortunately weakened the rest of the world's concern about population growth that the U.S. had championed only 10 years earlier. In the meantime, the American public long since had decided they had far more important things to do than to listen to this debate, and since the population problem had apparently been solved in the United States anyway, it was better to focus on more immediate concerns, like the economy.

By the time of the third global population conference in Cairo in 1994, the prevailing view was that providing people with information about and access to reproductive health care was a sufficient strategy for addressing the population issue. Provide access to family planning, the theory went, and the problem of rapid population growth will largely solve itself. The primary evidence for this view was that birth rates had declined in most countries after contraceptives had been introduced and that there were many people not yet using birth control methods who would be happy to stop or limit their childbearing. **Unfortunately, the Programme of Action adopted in Cairo largely ignored the fact that the average desired family size in sub-Saharan Africa and in some countries in Asia and Latin America -- the size which would be achieved if everyone could become a perfect contraceptive -- was five children per couple, which would double a population in 20-plus years.** The belief in Cairo was that, as the culture of family planning spreads, desired family size will come down of its own accord. Accordingly, it would not be necessary to worry about influencing family size decisions in any way. Even talking about a population problem, some held, could lead to abuses. **And unhappily, many in Cairo did not recognize there was an alternative -- that at that very moment, large numbers of people in several countries were watching or listening to intriguing soap operas which educated them about the personal benefits of small families in a non-coercive way, resulting directly in significant decreases in their desired family sizes.**

As a 30-year veteran of population activism, I have seen interest in population issues wax and wane and have sat through innumerable discussions about correct and incorrect wording to use in

describing population issues. In recent years, we have all witnessed the boards of more than one national organization holding a collective finger in the air to find out which way the wind was blowing on population now. Such readings of the popularity weathervane on population and immigration issues (often substantially influenced by pressure groups) have caused major swings -- and even retreats -- by a number of organizations.

If instead the public at large could be made aware of the basic data, attitudes and actions on population-related issues would probably be quite different. True, birth rates around the world generally are falling. But the growth in actual numbers in the developing countries, where practically all the expected future growth is going to come from, remains high. Except for China, more people in their reproductive years in the developing countries continue not using modern birth control methods than use them. And the average desired number of children in many of those countries is three to five or more. Accordingly, urgent and effective action to change minds and attitudes among very large numbers of people is essential. If not, the momentum of growth is almost certain to go on from generation to generation, even taking account of other slowing factors that are likely to come into play. The end result would probably be a global population of nine to 11 billion, as compared with the present nearly six billion, with all that means for mounting environmental and ecological damage, extinction of species, climate change, and shortages of water and resources, not to mention spreading human hunger, suffering and strife.

It is clear that any such urgent and effective actions must be of a voluntary nature. Any that smack of coercion are likely to produce resistance and backfire. It is clear, too, that very few couples' decisions about family planning and the numbers of children they want are made with global demographic considerations in mind. But it is a dangerous mistake to jump from that fact to conclude that merely making family planning services readily available to couples is enough or, far worse, that world population will take care of itself without serious damage.

I believe firmly that all of us who are concerned about population problems must respect the dignity of all individuals and, accordingly, give them full information and let them make their own decisions. But that does not mean we should forbear from encouraging them to adopt small family norms where that would be to their own and their children's advantage and would, as another consequence, help to forestall a looming global problem. Nor does it mean we should hit couples on the head with blunt exhortations to have only two children when we know that bringing them entertaining soap operas in indigenous settings, to introduce them to role models who find happiness and material improvement stemming in part from limiting their family sizes, is far more effective.

For those who have been deeply concerned about the accumulating consequences of ongoing excessive population growth, and for those who are newly learning about the issue, there is a middle way. Creative and considerate use of the marvels of mass communications over national television or radio networks has and can reach millions of couples at a time, treat them with dignity and respect, and still attempt to influence them for their own *and* the common good. **But it seems that the pendulum of political correctness in the population field is still swinging -- in the wrong direction, in my opinion. Just remember Professor Ashe's students next time someone tells you what is correct or incorrect thinking with regard to population, and decide for yourself what makes sense.**
