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## The birthrate drop in Iran

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### ABSTRACT

The recent steep decline in Iran's birthrate poses methodological and interpretive challenges insofar as statistical information on demographic factors cannot satisfactorily establish causalities or delineate processes of change. Our research suggests that this decline rests on the interplay of socio-cultural "idea" variables that augment factors of the developmental paradigm commonly used in population studies. Especially modernist ideas labeled "progress" in Iran have influenced reproductive behavior. Aiming to demonstrate the usefulness of idea-oriented qualitative research for understanding demographic dynamics represented quantitatively in the literature, we contribute to an explanation of a particular case as well as to demographic research methods.

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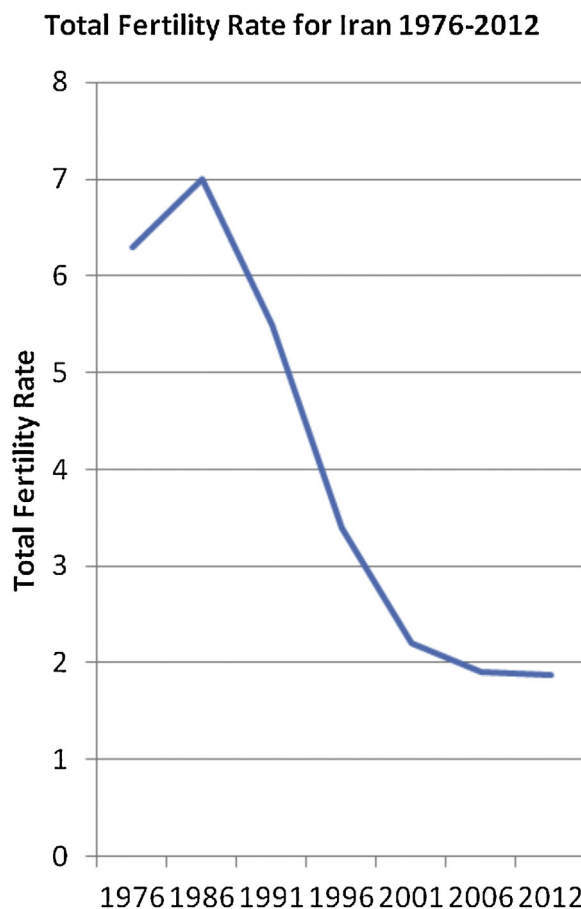
### Issues

We address two related issues in this paper: one is the potential use of "idea" features in the form of cultural insights in demographic research on fertility behavior; the other is a demonstration of this qualitative approach in a discussion of the recent fertility drop in Iran, an area we are familiar with through anthropological/medical field research and the literature.

Between 1986 and 2006 the birthrate in the Islamic Republic of Iran dropped from very high (about 7.5 children per woman) to below replacement levels, under 2 children per woman (Fig. 1). The sharp drop in fertility in a so-called theocratic, authoritarian country that people in the West associate with traditional outlooks and practices was unexpectedly different from other, similar Muslim countries

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**Fig. 1.** Total fertility rate (TRF) for Iran 1976–2012. Note the steep drop between 1986 and 2001.

Source: Index Mundi <indexmundi.com> (accessed 10.29.13). United Nations figures are similar except for 1996: the U. N. figure of 2.96 is 0.44 lower than the Index Mundi figure in this Table, making the decline after 1991 even steeper (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, World Fertility Data, 2008.) World Bank figures overall are lower yet, with a TFR below 2 already in 2000 and 1.67 in 2010.

surrounding Iran (Fig. 2). All these countries went through economic, social and political developments that foster a decline in fertility, but Iran's abrupt change from high to low fertility was different (Table 1). Demographers called the Iranian case "remarkable" (Erfani and McQuillan, 2008), "phenomenal" (Abbasi-Shavazi et al., 2003), "record pace" (Larsen, 2001) and "Iranian miracle" (Mehryar et al., 2001). These authors and others provide a wealth of statistical data about this brisk drop because it deviates from the decline in fertility rates in other developing countries, but their quantitative presentations of factors do not address with equal thoroughness the socio-cultural background in the Iranian case or other cases of rapid decline of birthrates that are on record.

The globally highest fertility rate on record is from the Hutterites in North America, with over 8 children per woman around 1960, followed, as in Iran, by a steep decline within a generation (Tietze, 1957). Curtis White (2003) addresses some ideational factors in this decline, demonstrating how this enriches the statistical evidence. References to history in the Iranian demographers' publications remain on the quantified socio-political and economic macro-level, providing valuable statistical information but little understanding of how this fertility drop happened, of the causes and the process of this decline. As we know, such "causes" nearly always are rooted in culture, traditions and relationships,

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