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Inter-spouse communication, contraceptive use and family size: relationship examined in Bihar and Tamil Nadu

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Introduction

Inter-spouse communication, though not a new dimension of fertility and family planning research, has remained much less explored in the Indian context than any other correlate of contraceptive use and current fertility. It has been observed that all women who show an interest in the use of family planning and are keen to space their births do not actually practice birth planning during their active reproductive years. The reason(s) that naturally comes into mind is (are) the intermediate factor(s) responsible for this lapse, and inter-spouse communication could be one such factor.

Bernard [1] reports on families where a "parallel relationship" rather than an "interactional relationship" is dominant in the husband-wife relationship on matters relating to family planning. Moreover, in societies where the male is the decision maker in the family, he would also make other vital decisions such as those relating to having or not having a child, using or not using contraception, or even about coital frequency. In such settings, an understanding of the role of healthy husband-wife communication in reducing fertility or in enhancing the use of contraception becomes unavoidable.

The role of husband-wife communication as an important variable in fertility dynamics dates back to the 1950s. Stycos and his co-workers [2], [3] gave inter-spouse communication due importance in their models. In his user-non user study in Dacca, East Pakistan, Green [4] observed that inter-spouse communication was an important process by which couples reached agreement on each other's hopes regarding child spacing and family size.

Bogue [5] observed that effective inter-spouse communication on matters related to family planning is very crucial for the success of family planning programmes. Chandrasekhar [6] also drew his conclusion on the same lines. And Mitchell, [7] in his study of husband-wife relationship and family planning in urban Hong Kong noted that many women who were favourably inclined to practice family planning did not practice it because of not receiving enough encouragement

from their spouses. He observed that their husbands might have had favourable attitudes towards family planning but this had never been communicated to the wives. A large number of unwanted pregnancies were partially the outcome of the inability of family members or family groups to make decisions. [7]

Except for a few studies, [9-11] the literature on Indian researches pertaining to husband-wife communication and family planning is scanty. Nevertheless, two important studies are noteworthy. The study of Ramakumar and Gopal [12] revealed that along the socioeconomic scale, couples in a higher position communicated more with each other than others. They concluded with the hope that it should be possible to demonstrate that communication between husband and wife on matters relating to family planning was a factor that influenced fertility. Later, in 1975, Mukherjee [13] brought out the importance of husband-wife communication on family planning matters and suggested certain policy modifications to the family planning programme and mass media coverage in order to improve family planning acceptance.

While the present paper has similar objectives, that is, to find out the effect of inter-spouse communication on contraceptive use and current fertility, it adopts finer statistical methodologies to control other variables during analysis. Furthermore, the analysis is based on the recent data provided by the National Family Health Survey (NFHS), 1992-93. [14] The study was conducted in two states for comparison. The states of Bihar and Tamil Nadu were selected because (a) they are widely different in their socio-economic and demographic characteristics; (b) Tamil Nadu has a much stronger family planning programme than Bihar; and (c) the states are in different stages of demographic transition.

Results

The NFHS data used in this study pertained to women who were currently married and married only once. The results begin with a family planning profile of the two states following which the effect of husband-wife communication on contraceptive use and current fertility using bivariate and multivariate analyses is presented. The NFHS listed as many as eleven contraceptive methods and asked the respondent whether she had ever used the method or not. Respondents who had ever used at least one of these methods were termed as an 'ever user of any contraceptive method'. This constituted the dependent variable in the analyses.

Table 1 presents some important indicators of family planning in Bihar and Tamil Nadu during 1992-93.

Table 1 : Some important family planning indicators, Bihar and Tamil Nadu, 1992-93

Variable	Bihar	Tamil Nadu
Knowledge of contraceptive methods*	94.9	99.1
Any method	94.9	99.1
Any modern method	29.4	46.2
Any traditional method		
Current use of contraceptive method*	23.1	49.8
Any method	21.6	45.2
Any modern method	1.5	4.6
Any traditional method		
Future FP use by number of living children (currently not using)*	11.9	11.9
0	23.4	36.1
1	26.6	39.3
2	28.5	34.1
3	24.9	13.6
4+		
Exposure to and acceptance of family planning message and discussion and approval of family planning**	26.6	51.9
Heard FP message on radio/TV	37.5	92.5
Accept media message on FP	39.6	47.9
Discussed FP with husband	46.0	63.7
Both husband and wife approve of FP		

* Percent of currently married women

** Percent of ever-married women

Source: NFHS (1992-93), India, IIPS, Mumbai, 1995.

It is interesting to note from the table that though knowledge of modern contraceptive methods was quite high in both the states (Bihar: 94.4 percent; Tamil Nadu: 99.1 percent), current contraceptive use was significantly lower in Bihar (21.6 percent as against 45.2 percent in Tamil Nadu). This wide difference between knowledge and practice confirms our view of the presence of some intervening factor(s) (including husband-wife communication about family size) affecting family planning use. The table further reveals the poor performance of the mass media in Bihar and a relatively better situation in Tamil Nadu. A low percentage of women are seen to have discussed family planning with their

husbands in both states (Bihar: 39.6 percent; Tamil Nadu: 47.9 percent). Further, couples in Tamil Nadu showed a greater understanding between them (63.9 percent) than their counterparts in Bihar (46.0 percent). This strengthens our presumption that good husband-wife communication is necessary for the success of family planning programmes.

Effect of husband-wife communication on contraceptive use

The results of the bivariate and multivariate analyses are presented in the following paragraphs.

Bivariate analysis:

Two variables were identified to understand whether the husband and wife have good communication about family planning practice - 'number of times the couple discussed family planning during the last one year' and 'attitude of couple towards family planning'. These variables were cross-tabulated with the ever use of family planning methods and are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 : Percent of currently married women ever using family planning by husband-wife communication

Husband-wife communication variables	Percent currently married women ever using family planning	
	Bihar	Tamil Nadu
Time discussed FP last year	32.4 (137)	29.9 (178)
Never	67.6 (287)	70.2 (418)
Once or more than once		
Total	100.0 (424)	100.0 (596)
Sig. Chi. Sq. (level)	.000	.000
Attitude of couple to FP	92.1 (363)	84.1 (480)
Husband wife both approve	2.5 (10)	1.6 (9)
Husband wife both disapprove	0.6 (2)	0.9 (5)
Husband approves wife disapproves	4.9 (19)	13.5 (77)
Husband disapproves wife approves		
Total	100.0 (394)	100.0 (571)
Sig. Chi. Sq. (level)	.000	.000

From Table 2 it is clear that ever use of a family planning method and the number of times the couples discussed family planning are closely related. Thus, 67.7 per cent of ever users in Bihar and 70.2 percent in Tamil Nadu reported to have discussed family planning with their husbands at least once during the last one year, indicating the importance of inter-spouse communication. This was further strengthened by a significant chi-square value. Moreover, Table 2 also shows that when the attitude of both the spouses was positive, the use of contraception was very high (Bihar: 92.1 percent; Tamil Nadu; 84.1 percent) and, when one of the spouses disapproved of it, the percentage of ever users was, as expected, quite low. However, in both the states there were some ever users even when both the husband and wife had a negative attitude towards family planning. This percentage was quite high for Tamil Nadu (13.5 percent); the high incentive-based family planning programme and the significant role played by the IEC programme of the state in successfully motivating eligible women could be the plausible reasons for this observation. A high, significant chi-square value also confirmed the close relationship between the ever use of family planning and attitude of couples towards family planning.

Multivariate analysis

To substantiate the above results, a binary logistic regression analysis was done with a dichotomous dependent variable 'ever use' (0 = no; 1 = yes). The variable, 'number of times the couple discussed family planning during the last one year' was grouped as 'never', 'once or twice', and 'more often', for obtaining a better understanding of its relationship with ever use. Among the explanatory variables, suitable dummy variables were created for: 'standard of living', 'number of surviving sons', 'education', 'number of times the couple discussed family planning during the last one year', and 'understanding between husband and wife'. The reference categories for 'standard of living', 'number of surviving sons', and 'education' were 'high standard of living', 'more than one surviving son', and 'high school and above educated'. 'Discussed family planning more than twice last year' and 'both husband and wife approve of family planning' were the reference categories for the variables 'number of times the couple discussed family planning during the last one year' and 'understanding between husband and wife' respectively.

Table 3 presents the results of logistic regression for variables related to husband-wife communication after controlling for the rest of the background variables.

It is clear from Table 3 that the odds ratio of 'discussed family planning more than twice last year' (reference category: odds ratio 1) was very high in relation to the odds ratio of 'never discussed' and 'discussed once or twice last year' for both

the states implying that ever use of a contraceptive method is highly sensitive to effective husband-wife communication. For instance, in Tamil Nadu ever use was 34 times higher among women who had discussed family planning more than twice with their husbands than among those who had discussed it once or twice. Similarly, the findings strongly support the view that the approval of family planning methods by both husband and wife effectively increases use of contraception as the odds ratio of 'both husband and wife approve' was higher as compared to when both or either spouse disapproved in the case of both the states (except in case of Tamil Nadu with the variable 'husband approves wife disapproves').

Table 3 : Influence of husband-wife communication on ever use of FP (logistic regression with dependent variable: ever use)

Independent variables	B	SE(B)	D.f.	Sig.	R	Exp(B)
BIHAR	-3.87	0.1223	1	0.0000	-3.940	0.021
Never discussed FP	-3.00	0.1187	1	0.0000	-.315	0.049
Discussed FP once or twice	-2.82	0.3452	1	0.0000	-.100	0.059
Both husband and wife disapprove	-2.34	0.8487	1	0.0057	-.029	0.096
Husband approves wife disapprove	-0.49	0.2792	1	0.0812	-.013	0.615
Husband disapproves wife approves						
TAMIL NADU	-4.58	0.1641	1	0.0000	-.399	0.010
Never discussed FP	-3.52	0.1578	1	0.0000	-.318	0.029
Discussed FP once or twice	0.78	0.3860	1	0.0427	-.021	0.457
Both husband and wife disapprove	0.10	0.5552	1	0.8591	0.000	1.104
Husband approves wife disapproves	-0.79	0.1708	1	0.0000	-.062	0.455
Husband disapprove wife approves						

Note : Other explanatory variable considered for analysis were religion, caste, place of residence, education, standard of living, exposure to mass media, current age, number of children died, total number of children ever born and number of surviving sons.

The above results held good when other independent variables like current age, education, religion, residence, caste, number of sons and daughters who had died, total number of children ever born, number of surviving sons, mass media exposure etc., were controlled. Thus, the results of logistic regression clearly indicate that effective husband-wife communication influences the success of the family planning programme.

Effect of husband-wife communication on current fertility

The relation between husband-wife communication and current fertility has been examined by a few researchers but without being able to establish any specific relationship between the two. Though current fertility is a function of many factors including ever use of contraceptive methods, the indirect effect of husband-wife communication on it through contraceptive use was not established clearly. The level of current fertility is satisfactorily determined by the mean number of children ever born to a group of women, and constituted the dependent variable. To capture husband-wife communication two questions were asked in the NFHS:

1. Whether the respondent ever discussed the number of children she wants with her husband or not (yes/no); and
2. Whether her husband's desire for children is the same or more or fewer as compared to hers.

Bivariate analysis

Table 4 cross tabulates the mean number of children ever born with the two inter-spouse communication variables discussed above. It is clear from the table that for both the states, the mean number of children ever born was less for the group of couples who had discussed the number of children they want between them, suggesting thereby that positive communication between spouses can bring down family size.

Table 4 : Number of children ever born to currently married women by husband-wife communication

Explanatory variable	Bihar			Tamil Nadu		
	Mean	S.D.	(N)	Mean	S.D.	(N)
Husband and wife discussed number of children (FP)	3.36	2.08	(1772)	2.42	1.61	(1249)
	3.84	2.37	(1937)	3.25	2.13	(526)
Yes						
No						
Mean	3.61	2.25	(3709)	2.67	1.82	(1775)
Husband's desire v/s wife's desire	3.45	2.16	(1947)	2.55	1.70	(1333)
	3.49	2.20	(235)	2.96	2.00	(138)
Same number	3.44	2.16	(108)	2.57	1.90	(57)
More children						
Fewer children						
Mean	3.46	2.16	(2290)	2.59	1.75	(1528)

Table 4 also reveals that for both the states, when the husband wanted more children than the wife, the mean number of children ever born was higher than when the husband wanted fewer or the same number of children as did the wife. This clearly indicates the influence of the husbands in achieving their desired family size especially in a male dominated society. An interesting point to be noted from the table is that for both the states a very high percentage of women reported that their husbands desired the same number of children as they did.

Multivariate analysis

Multiple regression analysis was performed using the number of children ever born as the explained variable and several background variables such as religion, caste, education, standard of living, number of surviving sons and exposure to mass media along with husband-wife communication variables (husband's desire vs. wife's desire) (regarding the number of children to have), and '(spouses) have discussed the number of children to have as explanatory variables. For the variable 'husband's desire vs. wife's desire' with regard to the number of children they wanted, those couples who wanted the same number of children were taken as the reference category for those whose desired family size differed. The results of the inter-spouse communication variables are given in Table 5.

Table 5 : Influence of husband-wife communication on children ever born: results of multiple regression analysis

Husband-wife communication variables	Bihar			Tamil Nadu		
	B	SE(B)	Sig(T)	B	SE(B)	Sig(T)
Husband desires fewer	0.136	0.134	0.3105	-0.12	0.149	0.4301
Husband desires more	0.156	0.093	0.0932	0.291	0.099	0.0035
Discussed number of children	-0.02	0.048	0.6892	0.084	0.062	0.1750

Note : Other explanatory variables considered for analysis were religion, caste, place of residence, education, standard of living, exposure to mass media, current age, total number of children died, ever use of family planning methods, and number of surviving sons.

As can be seen from [Table 5](#), the outcome of the multiple regression did not strongly support the results of the bivariate analysis. For Bihar, none of the inter-spouse communication variables were significant. However, in the case of Tamil Nadu, husbands who wanted more children than their wives were observed to have a significantly higher number of children than those whose family size preference coincided with that of their wives. The influence of the variable 'discussed about the number of children to have' was found to be insignificant in both the states as this depends on a very good understanding between couples about family size issues. For instance, a mere discussion with her husband may not influence a woman to have fewer children if her husband actually desires more children than she does. Overall, then, the multiple regression analysis showed no specific relationship between husband-wife communication and the number of children ever born (especially in Bihar) and thus was not in consonance with the findings of earlier studies. [\[8\]](#), [\[12\]](#)

Discussion

Since the inception of the family planning programme, researchers have shown an interest in family planning knowledge, attitude and practice studies. These studies have generally observed the educational level or knowledge of birth spacing to influence contraceptive practice though the correlation between these influencing factors and actual contraceptive use has been far from expected. The

present paper has tried to explain this gap by introducing husband-wife communication on family planning as one of the influencing variables.

The results in the first part of the analysis significantly indicate the necessity of good husband-wife communication for the actual practice of contraception - to limit or to space births. The second part of the analysis tries to relate inter-spouse communication with actual fertility. The results show an inconsistent relationship, though in the case of Tamil Nadu, they establish that good husband-wife communication can effectively reduce family size.

In short, the findings of the paper immediately call for a new programme perspective for family planning agencies. Up to now, the family planning programme has developed in such a way that it focuses on the 'appropriate location of clinics', 'proper distribution of and counseling for contraception' or even sometimes 'door-to-door promotional efforts'. Advertising appeals are made to inform people about the options open to them and to promote a rational figure of family size for each couple. Our findings open up a new perspective in that in addition to existing services, efforts can be made to make couples understand the importance of making decisions about family planning jointly, by planning their family after effective verbal communication between them. Extensive media coverage, proper pictorial representation and door-to-door canvassing of the subject may be effectively used to bring home the importance of inter-spouse communication for joint decision-making to improve family planning acceptance and thereby to reduce fertility. Proper planning in the framing of our IEC programme to incorporate elements of inter-spouse communication is the primary need.

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