Returnees vs Absentees : Are They Really Different?

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Introduction

A study in which a panel of interviewees is followed up and reinterviewed makes it possible to study and evaluate change over time. It has the inherent problem, however, of drop-outs due primarily to migration and mortality. A question then arises: Do those who are reinterviewed differ enough from the drop-outs to invalidate the results of the study? A common sense answer might be that the two groups are likely to differ, but there are few studies and little research on this aspact.

The question to be considered here is whether reliance can be placed on the responses of the returnees in this study as representative of the original sample. Perhaps the most important factor is the proportion of the sample who returned for reinterview. In this study, 82 percent of the sterilized women returned for a medical check-up and interview one year after the operation. With this high rate of retention the researcher could have a high level of confidence that the returnees were representative of the initial group.

Purpose

The specific purpose of this brief article is to investigate whether some selected variables might differentiate returnees and absentees sufficiently to indicate significant differences between the two groups in the sample.

Source of Data

Results in this article is based on data from a study entitled *Thailand : Postpartum Sterilization by Nurse Midwives Project.* Eight hundred and twenty women were sterilized during 11 March - 3 May 1985 by physicians, and nurse midwives who were trained under the above project (For more details of sampling procedure see Proceedings of the Seminar of 5th Fertility Research Investigators' Meeting, September 1986 : 20). One year later, 676 women, or 82 percent returned for medical check up

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and the reinterviewing was conducted to investigate their satisfaction in various aspects related to sterilization.

Results

A Comparison of Returnees and Absentees

Six variables were used in comparing the two groups of women; two were demographic, two socioeconomic and two service-related. The findings are presented in Table 1.

Of the two demographic variables, the first, age of the women, did not appear to affect materially the proportion of returnees. Only the 25 to 34 year olds had a somewhat higher percentage of absentees while the other age groups recorded little difference, X^2-test is insignificant. The second variable, number of living children, had what might be described as a curvilinear pattern. The highest rate of return was shown by those with 0 to 2 children and the lowest rate by those with three or four children. Howover, X^2-test is insignificant.

As might be expected in terms of level of education, the first socioeconomic variable, women with the least amount of schooling had the lowest percentage of returnees, but again the pattern is curvilinear as the highest rate of return was recorded by women who had completed only four years of school. Education affects the returning significantly at .00 level. A considerable difference was found when the husband's occupation was classified. Eighty-seven percent of the returnees had husbands engaged in agriculture compared with seventy-four percent among women whose husbands had non-agricultural occupations. Also, X^2- test is significant at .00 level.

The two service-related variables were time spent traveling to the hospital and satisfaction with the operation. Surprisingly, the lowest proportion of returnees was found among those who needed less than 30 minutes to reach a hospital and the highest among those traveling one to two hours. The percentage of absentees increased only for those who needed two or more hours for the trip, X^2-test is significant at .03 level. In terms of satisfaction with the operation there was almost no difference in level of return between those expressing satisfaction and dissatisfaction or uncertainly. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Percentage of various characteristics of women returning one
year later for health check-up, by selected variables

Characteristic	Returned	Did not return	X^2	Significant level
Age				
Less than 25 years	85.0(209)	15.0 (37)		
25 - 34 years	79.9(366)	20.1 (92)	4.82	.09
35 - 49 years	7.1(101)	12.9 (15)		
Total	2.4(676)	17.6(144)		
Number of living children				
0 - 2	84.6(247)	15.4 (45)		
3 - 4	80.6(341)	19.4 (82)	2.80	.60
5 or more	83.8 (88)	16.2 (17)		
Education				
Lower than grade 4	73.3 (96)	26.7 (35)		
Completed grade 4	4.8(501)	15.2 (90)	10.03	.00
Higher than grade 4	80.6 (79)	19.4 (19)		
Husband's occupation				
Agriculture	86.9 (466)	13.1 (70)		
Non-agriculture	73.9 (210)	6.1 (74)	20.77	.00
Time spent traveling to the hospital				
Less than 30 minutes	78.5(179)	21.5 (49)		
30 - 60 minutes	81.7(290)	18.3 (65)	9.24	.03
61 - 119 minutes	90.1(146)	9.9 (16)		
120 minutes or more	81.3 (61)	18.7 (14)		
Satisfaction with the operation				
Satisfied	82.2(645)	17.8(140)		
Not satisfied, not sure	80.0 (8)	20.0 (2)	0.03	.86

The Index of Dissimilarity (ID) was calculated to provide an indicator of the extent of difference between the returnees and absentees and is reported in Table 2. A value of 0 indicates no difference at all and 100 means there is total difference. The greatest difference is found in classification by husband's occupation, with an Index of Dissimilarity of 20.3, suggesting some degree of significance. (See Table 2)

Table 2. Percent distribution of various characteristics returnees and absentees and index of dissimilarity by selected variables

Characteristic	Returned	Did not return	Diffe- rences	ID
Age				
Less than 25 years	30.9	25.7	5.2	
25 - 34 years	54.1	63.9	9.8	
35 - 49 years	15.0	10.4	4.6	
Total	100.0	100.0	19.6	9.8
Number of living children				
0 - 2	36.5	31.3	4.2	
3 - 4	50.4	56.9	6.5	
5 or more	13.1	11.1	1.3	
Total	100.0	100.0	12.0	6.0
Education				
Lower than grade 4	14.2	24.3	10.1	
Completed grade 4	74.1	62.5	11.6	
Higher than grade 4	11.7	13.2	1.5	
Total	100.0	100.0	23.2	11.6
Husband's occupation				
Agriculture	68.9	48.6	20.3	
Non-agriculture	31.1	51.4	20.3	
Total	100.0	100.0	40.62	0.3

(Cont.)

Table 2 (Cont.)

Characteristic	Returned	Did not return	Diffe- rences	ID
Time spent traveling to the hospital				
Less than 30 minutes	26.5	34.0	7.5	
30 - 60 minutes	42.9	45.1	2.2	
61 - 119 minutes	21.6	11.1	10.5	
120 minutes or more	9.0	9.7	0.7	
Total	100.0	100.0	20.9	10.5
Satisfaction with the operation				
Satisfied	98.8	98.6	0.2	
Not satisfied, not sure	1.2	1.4	.2	
Total	100.0	100.0	0.4	0.2

Conclusion and Implications

Some differences in the percentages of returnees were found in each of the six variables examined in this article. The Index of Dissimilarity as calculated for six variables indicates that, with the possible exception of husband's occupation, the differences are not significant, as measured or evaluated by both Chi-square statistic and Index of Dissimilarity. Combining this finding with the high percentage of returness suggests that it is reasonable to conclude that the information obtained during the follow-up interviews of the returnees is representative of the entire group.

Notes

Returnees : Sterilized women who kept appointments for medical check-ups one year after surgery

Absentees : Sterilized women who did not return for appointments one year later

No record was made of any returns for medical or other reasons prior to the time of the one-year appointment

Acknowledgment