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First a job, then a child? Subgroup variation in women's employment-fertility link

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ABSTRACT

Both macro and micro level research exhibits signs of a turnaround in the relation between female labour force participation and fertility. However, it can be expected that this association varies considerably between population subgroups. Drawing on 2001 Belgian census data combined with birth registers for first, second and third births for the period 2002–2005, we assess within-state differences in the female employment-fertility link by education and ethnic origin. In line with the theory of the value of children, our results indicate that groups with limited labour market opportunities are more likely to have a child in response to unemployment or inactivity. Women with low education or a migrant background are more likely to adopt childbearing strategies as an alternative to labour market participation, whereas for Belgian women or highly educated women labour market participation is more positively related to childbearing. © 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Life course theorists have coined the term 'parallel careers' for the assumption that events in one life domain will impact events in other life domains and a large body of research assesses the impact of female labour market participation on women's fertility. As a result of the decline in fertility in tandem with increases in female labour participation in many developed countries, the New Home Economics (Becker, 1991) and the Second Demographic Transition theory (Lesthaeghe, 2010; Van de Kaa, 2002) assume that the female employment-fertility link is negative. However, the changing macro-level correlation between female labour force participation and fertility since the mid-1980s (Ahn & Mira, 2002; Engelhardt, Kögel, & Prskawetz, 2004; Engelhardt & Prskawetz, 2004) and increasing signs for positive associations between female labour force participation and birth hazards at the micro level (Kreyenfeld & Andersson, 2014; Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008) have stimulated researchers to consider changing socio-cultural and institutional contexts in Europe. These changes include the extension of reconciliation policies (Brewster & Rindfuss, 2000; Raz-Yurovich, 2014) and changing gender roles (Goldscheider, Bernhardt, & Lappegard, 2015) which potentially decrease the opportunity costs of childrearing (Raz-Yurovich, 2016; Rindfuss, Guilkey, Morgan, Kravdal, & Guzzo, 2007). As a result,

contemporary fertility research increasingly supports the hypothesis that in dual-earner societies female employment positively associates with childbearing (Kreyenfeld & Andersson, 2014; Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008; Oppenheimer, 1994).

Expanding on previous research by Kreyenfeld and Andersson (2014) we claim that in addition to the need to study the employment-fertility relationship in different welfare settings (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008), it is crucial to acknowledge that this relation may vary strongly between population subgroups within states. This study focusses on the varying employment-fertility link across educational groups as well as origin groups. These population subgroups are expected to exhibit varying work-family behaviour due to (I) varying attitudes as a result of different socialisation contexts, religious beliefs and schooling, but also (II) as a result of varying labour market opportunities related to country-specific human capital, educational degrees, and wage potential (Becker, 1991; De Valk, 2008; Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa, 1994; Hakim, 2002; Janssens, 1993; Liebroer & Corijn, 1999). Previous research for a handful of European countries shows a positive educational gradient in the effect of employment on first births (Kreyenfeld & Andersson, 2014; Matysiak & Vignoli, 2010; Schmitt, 2012; Wood, Vergauwen, & Neels, 2015). Although the link between economic activity and higher order births has received less attention, Kreyenfeld and Andersson (2014) also find a positive educational gradient in the relation between employment and higher order births in Germany and Denmark. Our understanding of how employment and fertility associate differently for different ethnic origin groups is even more limited. The

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finding of relatively similar employment-fertility links across different origins in Sweden is associated with the universal and inclusive Swedish welfare regime (Andersson & Scott, 2005; Lundström & Andersson, 2012). However, to our knowledge the employment-fertility link has not been compared between origin groups in other European countries.

This paper assesses varying effects of employment on first, second, and third births by education and origin in Belgium at the turn of the 21st century. Two features of the Belgian context make it an interesting case to study subgroup differences in the employment-fertility link. First, Belgium can be regarded as a vanguard country with respect to work-family reconciliation policies. Since the 1970s formal childcare has been continuously extended and as a result Belgium is included in a short list of countries that meet the Barcelona target of 33% childcare enrolment for children aged 0–3 (Population Council, 2006). Belgium is also a forerunner country with respect to the subsidized outsourcing of household work (e.g. service vouchers) (Marx & Vandelanootte, 2014; Raz-Yurovich, 2014). The Belgian parental leave system is characterised by relatively short leave entitlements in full-time equivalents and the popularity of the 20% labour reductions indicates that work and family are considered as two spheres of life which can be combined (Desmet, Glorieux, & Vandeweyer, 2007; Ray, Gornick, & Schmitt, 2009). A relatively high total fertility rate during the period under consideration in this study – 1.7 children per women in 2002–2005 (Eurostat, 2016) – as well as weak socio-economic differences in fertility outcomes in Belgium suggest that these developments have decreased opportunity costs of childbearing, especially for economically active women (Klüsener, Neels, & Kreyenfeld, 2013; Neels & De Wachter, 2010; Wood, Neels, & Kil, 2014). Female labour force participation in 2002–2005 exceeds 70% for women aged 25–49 (StatBel, 2016), and the motherhood employment gap is small from a European perspective (Boeckmann, Misra, & Budig, 2014; Cukrowska-Torzewska, 2016). Second, in comparison to Nordic European countries, the Belgian labour market and access to reconciliation policies have been found to be far less inclusive (Corluy, 2014; Marx & Vandelanootte, 2014; Van Lancker & Ghysels, 2012). Opportunities in the labour market are greatly determined by educational attainment and as a result highly educated groups have been found to benefit to a much greater extent from the extension of public childcare and parental leave systems (Desmet et al., 2007; Ghysels & Van Lancker, 2009; Storms, 1995; Wood & Neels, 2014). Although (non-western) migrants display relatively unfavourable labour market positions across Europe, Belgium exhibits the largest employment and poverty gaps between native groups and other origin populations (Corluy, 2014; Phalet, 2007; Timmerman, Vanderwaeren, & Crul, 2003). This great labour market inequality has been found largely responsible for differential rates of uptake of reconciliation policies (Kil, Wood, & Neels, 2016).

The remainder of this article is organized as follows. Section 2 discusses why the employment-fertility link is expected to vary by educational attainment and ethnic origin. Section 3 documents our prospective research design using census and register data to estimate late-entry event-history models for first, second and third births. Section 4 discusses the descriptive and multivariate results whereas section 5 reflects on the main findings of this study and fruitful avenues for future research.

2. Theory

2.1. Uncertainty and childbearing

In the 1980s many scholars associated declining fertility with rises in women's labour force participation. Whereas the Second Demographic Transition theory relates women's rising economic autonomy to declining birth hazards through changing values and

the increased quest for self-realization (Van de Kaa & Lesthaeghe, 1986; Van de Kaa, 2002), the New Home Economics explain the negative relation between female labour force participation and fertility with increased opportunity costs (Becker, 1981). However, recent research indicating a turnaround in the association between female labour force participation and fertility has led researchers to take into account the changing socio-cultural and policy contexts in Europe (Ahn & Mira, 2002; Matysiak & Vignoli, 2008). In countries with extensive support toward work-family combination like Belgium, the choice between work and family does not necessarily need to be made.

Available literature widely supports the hypothesis that family formation will be postponed as a result of female economic uncertainty (Kamran & Goldstein, 2010; Neels, Theunynck, & Wood, 2012; Sobotka, Skirbekk, & Philipov, 2011). Although being out of the labour force may be perceived as a cheap time for childbearing (Vikat, 2004), being out of employment in a dual-earner society can yield feelings of nonfulfillment, prevents leaving the parental home, postpones union formation, and hampers the accumulation of necessary resources to handle the cost of family formation (Adsera, 2011; Kreyenfeld & Andersson, 2014). These postponing effects of non-employment on childbearing are especially relevant for childless women in early stages of the life-course since the biological (e.g. fecundity) and social (e.g. finding a desirable partner) age limits to family formation are not yet a major factor (Kreyenfeld & Andersson, 2014). Hence we expect a positive effect of employment on first birth hazards (hypothesis 1).

With respect to second and third birth hazards, the effect of employment is assumed to be weaker for two reasons (hypothesis 2). First, following previous research (De Wachter & Neels, 2011) we assume that unemployed and inactive mothers are selective groups as these women have already had a first birth. Some of these women decided to have a first birth without participating in the labour force, whereas many others decided to opt out of the labour force after the first birth. Both groups are likely to exhibit stronger child- and family-orientations which potentially yield less positive or even negative employment-fertility links for higher-order births (De Wachter & Neels, 2011). Second, we assume that higher-order births are less easily postponed. Women at risk of higher-order births are more likely to approach the biological age limit to fecundity. In addition to this biological clock, the time since the previous child acts as a social clock as parents seek to find a playmate for the previous child. Furthermore the time spent outside the labour force can act as a career-related clock as parents may seek shorter birth intervals to minimize the penalties associated with extended career breaks (Kreyenfeld, 2002; Ni Bhrolchain, 1986).

2.2. Path-dependency and uncertainty reduction

In this paper we argue that the aforementioned mechanisms are insufficient in their account of the association between individual-level economic activity and childbearing behavior. This is due to the fact that subgroup variation in the employment-fertility relation is not acknowledged. In the theory of the value of children, Friedman et al. (1994) define uncertainty as the amount of possible life course actions one can take. In line with life course theory they claim that life events are path-dependent on previous actions (Elder, 1985). Hence to the extent that childbearing, career investments, or other events yield strings of future actions, different strategies to reduce uncertainty may occur. Instead of assuming that employment reduces uncertainty for all subgroups in contemporary dual-earner societies, the theory of the value of children asserts that uncertainty can be reduced in many ways. The path to uncertainty reduction depends strongly on the opportunities available. Parenthood as a means for uncertainty reduction

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