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Educational differences in fertility desires, intentions and behaviour: A life course perspective[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Despite a long tradition of studying the relationship between education and fertility outcomes less is known about how educational differences in fertility intentions are formed and translated into achieved births over the life course. This paper provides new insights using data from a large cohort study and Miller's Traits-Desires-Intentions-Behaviour framework for understanding childbearing. We examine how parental aspirations for education, educational ability in childhood, and educational attainment in young adulthood relate to: males' and females' fertility desires in adolescence; fertility intentions in early adulthood; and educational differences in the achievement of fertility intentions. We conclude that family building preferences expressed in adolescence, especially those for the timing of entry into parenthood are shaped by parental socio-economic background, mediated through educational ability and parental expectations for education. In young adulthood, no clear, consistent educational gradient in intended family size is found. However, there is a negative educational gradient in the likelihood of achieving intended births by age 46, especially for women. The findings indicate the importance of educational differences in employment and partnership behaviour in mediating these relationships.

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background

Increased female education has been seen as one of the most important factors affecting levels of fertility (Axinn & Barber, 2001; Basu, 2002; Rindfuss, Bumpass, & John, 1980), operating either via a postponement effect of enrolment (Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991), economic opportunity costs of leaving the labour market to care for children (Becker, 1981;

Rondinelli, Aassve, & Billari, 2010; Willis, 1973), through the impact of education on female emancipation and a desire for personal fulfilment (Lesthaeghe, 1998; Lesthaeghe & Surkyn, 1988; Van de Kaa, 1987), or through the reduction in the number of unintended births (Musick, England, Edgington, & Kangas, 2009). Yet despite a long tradition of studying the relationship between education and fertility outcomes less is known about how or whether educational differences in fertility desires expressed in adolescence, are modified according to circumstances in early adulthood, and translated into achieved births over the life course. In part this is due to a lack of suitable prospective data. The National Child Development Study provides a unique opportunity to take such a life course approach having followed up men and women born in Britain in 1958 through their childhood, adolescence and adult years to the end of the reproductive period. We draw on the psycho-social approach of Miller (1992, 1994) to identify how education relates to British males' and females' fertility desires in adolescence,

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intentions in early adulthood and to the achievement of fertility intentions by age 46.

1.2. Existing evidence on educational differences in fertility intentions and outcomes

In contemporary developed countries there is relatively little evidence that more educated men or women want smaller families. Recent analyses of cross-sectional data show a diversity of findings across the European Union (Beaujouan, Sobotka, Brzozowska, & Neels, 2013; Testa, 2012), though overall, and in some specific countries, women with higher levels of education have a larger mean intended family size than their less educated counterparts (Heiland, Prskawetz, & Sanderson, 2005; Mills, Mencarini, Tanturri, & Begall, 2008; Testa, 2012). However, there remain significant educational differences in achieved fertility with highly educated women on average having smaller mean actual family size. Longitudinal individual level data on intentions and outcomes at the end of the reproductive lifetime show that women with higher education are more likely to have fewer births than they intend. For example, among US 1957–1964 birth cohorts followed up in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979, women enrolled in higher education were significantly more likely to underachieve their fertility intentions over the subsequent 20 years or so (although no impact of educational enrolment for men was seen) (Morgan & Rackin, 2010; Quesnel-Vallee & Morgan, 2003). Educational enrolment has a clear postponing effect on fertility since being a student and starting a family are generally seen as incompatible activities (Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991; Ni Bhrolcháin & Beaujouan, 2012). The postponement of the start of childbearing often leads to the underachievement of intentions (Berrington, 2004). Repeated postponement can lead to a subsequent decision not to have children, or foregone childbearing due to the constraints of the biological clock, especially for women (Morgan & Rackin, 2010). Higher levels of education have been previously found to be associated with greater instability in intentions across the life course, particularly for women (Heiland, Prskawetz, & Sanderson, 2008). As more educated women finish their studies and begin work they may become increasingly aware of barriers against combining motherhood and a career, revising their intentions downwards to sit more in line with reality (Liefbroer, 2009).

The impact of educational attainment on fertility is made complex by the fact that education may have an impact on either the timing or quantum of fertility (or both). Furthermore, educational differences in completed family size obscure greater divergences in completed parity distributions according to education (De Wachter & Neels, 2011; Kravdal, 1992; Kreyenfeld, 2002). The effect of educational attainment on the formation and achievement of intentions is also likely to depend upon the household and societal context within which individuals are operating. Previous research has demonstrated the importance of considering the partner's characteristics and intentions (Berrington, 2004; De Wachter & Neels, 2011; Rosina & Testa, 2009; Thomson & Hoem, 1998) and the level of institutional support for childbearing in a particular

country (Mills et al., 2008; Testa, 2012). Methodologically, the analysis of educational differences in the relationship between intentions and outcomes is made complex by the presence of recursive relationships e.g. between economic activity status and childbearing, anticipatory effects e.g. highly educated women might remain single since they can see how difficult it might be to combine work and family role, and the presence of unmeasured third variables e.g. economic inactivity and childlessness can both be related to underlying poor physical or mental health (De Wachter & Neels, 2011).

This paper provides new insights by placing the analyses of fertility intentions and outcomes within a life course framework which acknowledges the importance of parental background and childhood attributes in the formation of fertility desires and intentions. By examining subsequent employment and partnership patterns in adulthood we show some of the pathways through which educational differences in achieved fertility occur. Inspired by the developmental socio-psychological approach of Miller (1992, 1994) we use detailed prospective data collected within a national birth cohort study to explore how parental socio-demographic factors operate through parental aspirations for their offspring's education, and actual educational attainment to impact on family preferences at age 16. We then investigate fertility intentions reported at age 23 and examine the factors associated with their realisation by age 46. The large sample size and availability of data for both men and women permits the identification of gender differences in these processes. We also move beyond some previous work in explicitly incorporating uncertain fertility preferences and intentions into our analyses.

2. Analytical framework and hypotheses

Our analytical approach is based upon the Traits-Desires-Intentions-Behaviour (TDIB) model of fertility (Miller, 1994) shown in Fig. 1. According to Miller (1992, p. 266) motivations are “psychological traits or dispositions that are derived from the genetic makeup and/or experience of individuals and that endure in them over time”. These motivations are generally not observed but, when activated, are experienced as childbearing desires. Only after an assessment of perceived situational constraints, e.g. in terms of partnership status or employment situation, are desires then converted into intentions. The latter are deemed to imply some degree of personal commitment to act, albeit within an unspecified time frame. Comparison of achieved fertility at the end of the childbearing years with intentions in young adulthood indicates the extent to which men and women realise their fertility intentions. Of course, intentions will change over the life course in response to further information concerning opportunities and constraints (Iacovou & Tavares, 2011) and we might expect this to be particularly so for those who delay the start of their childbearing (Liefbroer, 2009).

2.1. Fertility desires in adolescence

Parental socio-economic background impacts on fertility desires in adolescence through the inter-generational

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