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Advances in Life Course Research

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/alcr



Fertility after repartnering in the Netherlands: Parenthood or commitment?

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 17 May 2013

Accepted 13 August 2013

Keywords:

Commitment

Fertility

Higher-order unions

Parenthood

Repartnering

The Netherlands

ABSTRACT

In this paper, we focus on childbearing after the dissolution of the first marital union. The discussion of what drives fertility decisions after dissolution has been largely dominated by the arguments that: (a) people want to have a child as a way to achieve the adult status of parenthood (the “parenthood hypothesis”), and that (b) a shared child can signal the partners’ commitment to each other (the “commitment hypothesis”). Earlier studies have reported mixed findings for these hypotheses. We used couple data from several Dutch surveys ($N = 8094$ couples of which 10.2% included a repartnering partner) and utilized a new analytical approach to test the commitment proposition in particular. Our main findings lend support to the parenthood hypothesis when it comes to men’s transition to a union-specific birth and to the commitment hypothesis when considering women’s transition. Whereas for men, children from a prior union decrease the likelihood of transitioning to a union-specific birth, for women children from a prior union do not matter. That is, women would find it important to confirm the union as a family despite the presence of children. Additional support for the commitment hypothesis for women is that being in a second union rather than first union increases chances of parity progression.

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Western European countries have clearly witnessed an increase in divorce rates over the last half a century and not surprisingly, researchers have examined what that might mean for other domains of family life such as fertility (Kneip & Bauer, 2009). The raise in divorce rates has been considered to be one of the main factors undermining fertility in Europe as the instability in people’s marital histories can be an obstacle to realizing their fertility intentions (for an overview, see Thomson, Winkler-Dworak, Spielauer, & Prskawetz, 2012; Bavel, Jansen, & Wijckmans, 2012). However, the climbing divorce trends have not necessarily signaled a retreat from partnerships

in general. Indeed, empirical evidence suggests that the majority of divorcees repartner (for an overview, see Coleman, Ganong, & Fine, 2000; Sweeney, 2002) with a probably stronger preference for cohabitation over remarriage (Wu & Schimmele, 2005). The fact that an increasing number of people divorce and repartner at childbearing ages means that fertility decisions are now frequently also made in higher order unions. Indeed, some researchers have even reported a positive correlation between divorce and fertility rates starting in the 1990s (e.g., Billari & Kohler, 2004) though others have suggested that this positive correlation at the macro level does not necessarily mean that the negative correlation at the individual level has been reversed (Van Bavel, Jansen, & Wijckmans, 2012).

Higher order unions differ from first unions in a number of important ways, which can affect subsequent fertility. Of particular interest for us in this work are the marital and parental statuses of the two partners at the start of the current union. A number of works have examined fertility

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in higher order unions, predominantly by comparing how likely the transition to having a common child in the new union is for individuals with and without prior children (e.g., Buber & Prskawetz, 2000; Griffith, Koo, & Suchindran, 1985; Kalmijn & Gelissen, 2007; Prskawetz, Vikat, Philipov, & Engelhardt, 2003; Stewart, 2002; Vikat, Thomson, & Hoem, 1999). In our work, we continue in this line of research and focus on the birth of a shared child within a higher-order union. Notably, we do so by utilizing detailed, couple data from several Dutch multi-actor studies - the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), the Family Survey Dutch Population (FSDP 1998, 2003, and 2009), and the survey Households in the Netherlands 1995 (HiN95). These studies include comparable information for both partners in the current union concerning their pre-union parental and marital statuses. We add to the literature in two ways. First, a number of previous studies have been unable to take into consideration the characteristics of both partners though the argument has clearly been made that, “women who are partners of men for whom it is the second union are different from women who are themselves already in their second union. Similarly, the reverse argument holds for men, i.e., men in second unions may be different from male partners in unions that are the second unions for women” (Buber & Prskawetz, 2000). Our complete couple data allow us to avoid this caveat of earlier research. Second, in our consideration of how one’s prior marital status might influence the transition to having a first shared child in a higher order union, we account for the fact that if a repartnering parent wants to have another child with the new partner, they will then in fact be making a higher parity progression. This transition to having a higher order child will be associated with a larger care load, a point already made in the literature (Henz & Thomson, 2005). Even if repartnering individuals might be more willing to have a child with their current partner than non-repartnering individuals, that transition might be more burdensome in the presence of children from a prior union. In our contribution to the existing literature we explicitly compare the transition to a higher order birth for the never-previously-married and the previously-married with the same number of children. We also account for the fact that in a higher-order union with a pre-union child the transition might be faster not so much because of a commitment effect but because there is a desire for close age spacing between the half-siblings. In other words, our data and analytical approach allow us to explicitly test the proposition put forward by the commitment hypothesis. We elaborate on these points in the subsequent sections.

1. Fertility decisions in first and higher order unions

The discussion of what drives fertility decisions has been largely dominated by the argument that people want to have a child as a way to achieve the adult status of parenthood (the so-called “parenthood hypothesis”) and the argument that a shared child can confirm the couple’s status as a family and signal the partners’ commitment to each other (the so-called “commitment hypothesis”;

Griffith et al., 1985; Vikat et al., 1999). In first unions, these individual and couple considerations coincide – the birth of the first child can solidify the relationship and it also confers parenthood status to the two partners. However, differences between higher order unions and first unions can result in these considerations being disconnected from each other. This is what makes fertility decisions after repartnering particularly interesting (Kalmijn & Gelissen, 2007). If the higher order union resembles a first union quite closely (for example, when there are no prior children present), then the two previously outlined mechanisms are still at play. If, however, the new union includes children from a prior relationship, the couple consideration (i.e., the desire to solidify the union) might still be there whereas the individual need to be a parent has already been met for at least one of the partners. This potential “mismatch” between the individual and couple considerations in higher order unions has drawn the attention of an increasing number of researchers to the role which prior children might play in fertility after repartnering.

Earlier studies have reported mixed findings, which do not clearly favor one hypothesis over the other. Some studies have found that when people enter a new union with children from an earlier relationship, they are less likely to have a union-specific first child. These findings lend support to the parenthood hypothesis though the effects at times differ depending on whose pre-union children one considers, their numbers, and residence. For example, Wineberg (1990) showed that remarried women with two or more children were less likely to have another child in the new union. Similarly, Buber and Prskawetz (2000) found that in Austria, the progression to a birth of a common child was less likely if either of the two partners entered the union with two or more children from a previous relationship. The difference between having just one vs. having two or more pre-union children has been attributed to the fact that parents might want to provide a (half-)sibling to their children. Yet, Vikat, Thomson, and Prskawetz (2004) reported that the presence of children from prior unions reduced the odds of a shared birth for couples in Finland and Austria, irrespective of the number of prior children. Comparable conclusions were reached by Kalmijn and Gelissen (2007) based on Dutch data (the Divorce in The Netherlands survey; Kalmijn, De Graaf, & Uunk, 2000) which however, did not provide information about the parental status of the new partner.

In contrast to these findings, the U.S. based study of Griffith et al. (1985) reported that a woman’s number of prior children did not have a significant effect on her fertility after repartnering. In other words, having a shared child as a way to formalize the union was important even for women who were already mothers. This lends support to the commitment hypothesis. More recent support for this hypothesis has come from studies based on Swedish (Vikat et al., 1999), British (Jefferies, Berrington, & Diamond, 2000), and Italian data (Meggiolaro & Ongaro, 2010), to mention just a few. In all of these studies, the authors found that having children from a prior union did not affect the transition to having shared children in the current union.

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