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Geographical variations in fertility and transition to second and third birth in Britain[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Geographical variations in fertility have been observed within several countries in Northern Europe, with higher fertility in rural areas, smaller settlements and city suburbs. However, the processes underlying such fertility variations across residential contexts are not well understood. This paper contributes to the on-going debate by looking at local variations in fertility in Britain. It aims to disentangle the relative contribution of a number of factors, including the socio-economic characteristics of individuals, housing conditions, patterns of residential relocation and lastly, contextual factors *stricto sensu*. In addition, it seeks to identify those aspects of reproductive behaviour which are more likely to be associated with the observed spatial differences, and to distinguish between those that may be influenced by local context and those that respond to social influences at different scales. The focus is on local fertility contexts which, we argue, have the potential to influence the fertility behaviour of individuals through processes of social learning.

Individual level data from the British Household Panel Survey and methods of event history analysis are used to explore women's transitions to second and third order births in Britain in the early 21st century. Our findings indicate that individual reproductive life paths respond to a variety of social processes acting at various scales, and that these influences vary by birth order. Most interestingly, local fertility contexts influence transition to first birth but not transition to higher order births, which are mainly associated with individual characteristics of women and their partners. Dominant spacing effects, however, suggest that local contexts have an indirect impact on second and third births through age at the onset of childbearing. The study demonstrates the importance of considering social interaction theories, and their extension to scale-sensitive spatial contexts in which these interactions take place, when analysing geographical variations in fertility. Future research seeking to explain subnational fertility variations must recognize the importance of developing theoretical understandings to inform empirical work.

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1. Introduction

Spatial variations in fertility have been noted within several European countries. Observed differences between urban and rural areas, and by settlement size, show similar patterns of lower fertility in cities and higher fertility in less densely populated settlements (Kulu, 2013a; Kulu, Vikat, & Andersson, 2007). Further, relatively high fertility

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has been found around the periphery of large cities in Finland (Kulu & Boyle, 2009), Sweden (Kulu, Boyle, & Andersson, 2009) and Scotland (Boyle, Graham, & Feng, 2007). However, the processes underlying such fertility variations across residential contexts are still not fully understood.

This paper contributes to the on-going debate on local variations in fertility by examining transitions to second and third order births in Britain. Compared to other developed countries, childbearing patterns within UK are notable for the increasing heterogeneity in the quantum and/or timing of births among different population subgroups (Sigle-Rushton, 2008). This polarization of fertility behaviour is given spatial expression in the differing geographies of fertility. Our research is explicitly directed towards a closer understanding of the processes underlying the variations of fertility over space, which are also likely to vary by birth order. It aims to disentangle the relative contribution of a number of factors, including the socio-economic characteristics of individuals, housing conditions, patterns of residential relocation and lastly, contextual factors *stricto sensu*. In addition, it seeks to identify those aspects of reproductive behaviour which are more likely to be associated with the observed spatial differences, and to distinguish between those that may be influenced by the local context and those that respond to social influences at different scales.

However, any speculation on contextual effects on individual childbearing behaviour requires a prior reflection on how 'context' is defined and measured and a fuller understanding of how contextual effects operate. In this work we focus on 'local fertility contexts'. These are geographically defined, but built up from small spatial units so that they capture the immediate social context surrounding individuals. We argue that this local fertility geography has the potential to influence the fertility behaviour of individuals through mechanisms of social learning. Our previous work (Graham, Fiori, & Feng, 2012) showed that these local fertility contexts are indeed associated with significant differences in first birth risks, at least in large cities. In order to gain further understanding, this paper explores the transitions to second and third order births of women in Britain in the early 21st century which we expect may differ from transitions to first birth in terms of the major drivers and mechanisms of change. The analysis employs individual data from the British Household Panel Survey (for the years 1999–2008), which contains detailed information on individuals and their households, on housing characteristics and residential changes and, most importantly for our purposes, an indication of place of residence geo-coded to small areas.

The paper is structured as follows. The next section opens with a brief overview of trends and features of recent fertility in Britain; it then reviews the relevant literature on spatial variations in fertility and the underlying mechanisms. The second section presents in detail the aim of the study and the research hypotheses. The third section is devoted to a description of the data, methods, and variables. The results of the analyses are described in the fourth section. The final section offers a general

discussion of the study and its findings, and it is then followed by some concluding remarks.

2. Fertility variations in Britain: current trends and underlying processes

Over the last two decades, fertility levels in the United Kingdom have been high relative to other European countries. After reaching its minimum point of 1.63 children per woman in 2001, the total fertility rate (TFR) increased every year since to 1.91 children per woman in 2011. The trends observed in the constituent countries mirror the national average, albeit with differences in levels. In particular, fertility in Scotland has been systematically lower than in England and Wales in recent decades (Office for National Statistics, 2012). Cohort measures also indicate that – for England and Wales¹ – estimated average family size varies around 2 children for the cohorts of women completing childbearing in the first decade of this century. Although families with two children are the most prevalent, this figure conceals a greater dispersion of family size compared to that observed in other European countries with similar fertility levels. First, women born in England and Wales have one of the highest levels of childlessness in Europe (16–20% of women born in 1955–1965). Second, there are also a higher number of larger families than elsewhere. The percentage of women giving birth to an only child, on the other hand, is among the lowest in Europe (12–13% among the cohorts born in 1955–1965) (Breton & Prioux, 2009; Office for National Statistics, 2011; Shkolnikov, Andreev, Houle, & Vaupel, 2007). Thus, although a relatively large number of women choose not to have children, almost all of those who do become mothers have two or more children (Jefferies, 2001). Similarly dispersed is the tempo of childbearing over the life course. For women, the peak of fertility has shifted to older ages, from the late twenties to the early thirties, and fertility in the late thirties is also increasing (General Register Office for Scotland, 2011; Office for National Statistics, 2011). Despite this general trend of postponement, however, Britain is unique in Europe for its relatively high level of births to women below the age of 20, and this has remained fairly stable over time (Rendall et al., 2005; Sigle-Rushton, 2008).

The dispersions of both the tempo and the quantum of childbearing suggest the existence of a large diversity, perhaps larger than elsewhere, in childbearing across demographic and social groups. Indeed, several studies have highlighted the existence of a pronounced polarization of fertility behaviour by ethnicity, educational level and occupational status (Coleman & Dubuc, 2010; Ekert-Jaffe, Joshi, Lynch, Mougín, & Rendall, 2002; Ní Bhrolcháin

¹ Whereas estimates of true birth order are regularly produced for England and Wales using the General Household Survey, they are not currently produced for Scotland. The first (and only, to our knowledge) official attempt was made by Chamberlain and Smallwood (2004). Their estimates show that the cohorts of Scottish women born in 1950–1955 have parity distributions similar to their English and Welsh counterparts, whereas they suggest higher childlessness and smaller families (and thus lower completed family sizes) for the cohorts born in 1960 and later.

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