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Residential context, migration and fertility in a modern urban society

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ABSTRACT

This study examines fertility variation by residential context in Britain. While there is a large literature on fertility trends and determinants in industrialised countries, to date longitudinal research on spatial fertility variation has been restricted to the Nordic countries. We study fertility variation across regions of different sizes, and within urban regions by distinguishing between central cities and suburbs. We use vital statistics and longitudinal data and apply event history analysis. We investigate the extent to which the socio-economic characteristics of couples and selective migrations explain fertility variation between residential contexts, and the extent to which contextual factors potentially play a role. Our analysis shows that fertility levels decline as the size of an urban area increases; within urban regions suburbs have significantly higher fertility levels than city centres. Differences in fertility by residential context persist when we control for the effect of population composition and selective migrations.

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1. Introduction

There is a growing body of literature on spatial aspects of fertility and their importance for understanding fertility patterns and dynamics in industrialised countries. Studies show that urban–rural fertility variation may have decreased over time, but significant differences between various types of settlement persist (Kulu, Vikat, & Andersson, 2007). Fertility levels are high in rural areas and small towns and low in large cities. This pattern has been observed for the US (Glusker, Dobie, Madigan, Rosenblatt, & Larson, 2000; Heaton, Lichter, & Amoateng, 1989), England and Wales (Boyle, Graham, & Feng, 2007; Tromans, Natamba, & Jefferies, 2009), France (Fagnani, 1991), the Netherlands (De Beer & Deerenberg, 2007; Mulder & Wagner, 2001), Italy (Brunetta & Rotondi, 1991; Michielin, 2004; Vitali & Billari, 2011), Germany and Austria (Hank, 2001; Kulu, 2006), the Nordic countries (Kulu et al., 2007; Thygesen, Knudsen, & Keiding, 2005), the Czech Republic (Burcin & Kučera, 2000), Poland and Estonia (Kulu, 2005, 2006; Vojtěchovská, 2000) and Russia (Zakharov & Ivanova, 1996).

While studies on urban–rural fertility variation show broadly similar patterns (the larger the settlement, the lower the fertility levels), it is far from clear why fertility levels are higher in smaller places and lower in larger settlements. Usually two competing hypotheses are discussed in the literature: the compositional and the contextual. The *compositional* hypothesis suggests that fertility levels vary between places because different people live in different settlements, whereas the *contextual* hypothesis suggests that factors related to immediate living environment are of critical importance. The role of *selective migrations* has also been discussed in the literature; couples with childbearing intentions may decide to move to smaller places that are better suited to childrearing, whereas those with no childbearing plans may move to larger settlements leaving behind a select population group.

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Drawing upon individual-level data, recent research has shown that all three factors may play some role in spatial fertility variation, although their contribution varies by research context. For example, selective moves have been found to explain some fertility differences between city centres and suburbs, but account for little of the fertility variation between urban and rural areas (Kulu, 2013; Kulu & Boyle, 2009; Kulu, Boyle, & Andersson, 2009). However, almost all the studies investigating individual childbearing behaviour by residential context come from Nordic countries; little (if any) research has been conducted in other industrialised countries. Nordic countries (except Denmark) have large territories and relatively small populations; in all of them there are sufficiently large populations living in remote rural areas. These facts make Nordic countries rather unique in the context of many industrialised countries where population density is usually much higher and most people live in the vicinity of large urban areas. Nordic countries also lack truly big cities, while all four capital cities (Copenhagen, Oslo, Stockholm and Helsinki) have significantly increased over the past half-century or so, the size of the capital city region still hardly exceeds one or two million people. The presence of a significant population in remote rural areas and the lack of truly big cities thus raise questions as to the wider importance of the findings from the Nordic context. This is particularly relevant in the light of studies showing that spatial fertility variation significantly decreased in industrialised countries during the post-WWII period; although some variation may still exist (particularly in the 'peripheral' countries) this may be negligible and thus unimportant for the understanding of fertility patterns and dynamics in industrialised countries (cf. Coleman, 1996; Courgeau & Pumain, 1993).

In this study, we examine fertility variation by residential context in Britain. We move beyond a simple urban–rural dichotomy and distinguish residential contexts by size of area and density of population. Further, we also investigate fertility variation within urban regions by distinguishing between central cities and suburban areas. We investigate the extent to which the socio-economic characteristics of couples and selective migrations (or residential moves) explain fertility variation between various residential contexts, and the extent to which contextual factors potentially play a role. The British case is interesting and important to study for two reasons. First, it can be argued that no one lives in (remote) rural areas any more in Britain (except perhaps in Scotland), while there may be some truth in this it is still the case that people live in areas of different size, density and vicinity to nature. The British context allows us to explore whether and how much fertility varies across space in a 'modern urban' society (or in a society where rural areas, or at least their relative population, are negligible) and, more importantly, to investigate the causes of spatial fertility variation. Second, Britain has a 'true' world city, London. With a population of 7–10 million (depending on the definition of the urban area) it offers a good opportunity to study fertility levels and patterns in big cities in comparison to other residential contexts and to learn about fertility determinants in highly urbanised societies.

2. The causes of spatial fertility variation

The notion of *compositional factors* suggests that fertility levels vary across space because different people live in different settlements. First, the share of highly educated people is larger in cities than in small towns and rural areas. Fertility levels tend to differ by education level, with the lowest levels for university-educated individuals and the highest for individuals with only compulsory education (Hoem, 2005). Therefore, lower fertility in larger places is potentially explained by the higher proportion of highly educated people living there. Second, fertility variation by residential context may also result from the larger share of students in cities and towns than in small towns and rural areas (Kulu et al., 2007). Previous research shows that the likelihood of family formation is negligible when individuals are in full-time education. Third, the percentage of married people is larger in rural areas and small towns than in large cities and marriage is directly related to childbearing. Thus, the over-representation of married people in smaller places may explain the higher fertility rates there, particularly the higher likelihood of becoming a parent. However, the direction of causality between marriage and fertility is not clear; it is possible that people decide to marry when they wish to have children. It is important to note that some compositional factors may in fact reduce spatial fertility variation and thus hide potential contextual effects. For example, fertility in large cities may be relatively high because of significant immigrant and ethnic minority populations. Immigrants in industrialised countries have relatively high fertility because they usually come from high-fertility countries, and because international (female) migration is often driven by marriage and family formation (Toulemon, 2004).

Selective migrations may also explain fertility variation by residential context. Couples who intend to have a child may move from larger places to smaller ones because the latter are seen as better suited to raising children. Recent studies show that selective moves mostly take place between cities and neighbouring rural areas, many of which can be classified as suburbs (Kulu & Boyle, 2009). However, selective migrations are likely to be less relevant for explaining urban–rural fertility variation if the suburban areas around cities and towns have been classified in the analysis as part of the urban region. Previous studies have shown that there are families who move from cities and towns to small towns and rural areas over long distances, potentially with the intention of having another (or a third) child (Kulu, 2008). However, the share of such migrants is usually not large.

The *context* may influence fertility behaviour through economic opportunities and constraints or cultural factors (Kulu, 2013). Children are more expensive in cities than in rural areas (Becker, 1991; Livi-Bacci & Breschi, 1990). First, food, commodities and services have traditionally been more expensive in larger than in smaller places, although the spatial differences in the costs may have decreased recently because of greater competition between suppliers in the cities and access to large supermarkets with economies of scale. Secondly, children are more expensive

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