Class and Education Differences in Planned and Unplanned Fertility

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Class and education differentials in levels of fertility are longstanding. In recent decades, class and education differentials in the timing of fertility have widened, with higher status women increasing age at first birth much more than lower status women. In this paper, we examine three potential factors explaining socioeconomic differences in fertility: 1) the value women place on children; 2) opportunity costs; and 3) contraceptive efficacy. Using data from over twenty years of the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), we describe patterns of planned and unplanned childbearing among women from different class backgrounds and with varying levels of own education. We use competing hazard models to examine the role of socioeconomic status in planned and unplanned fertility, and we explore the extent to which the association between socioeconomic status and fertility is mediated by childbearing ideals, opportunity costs, and consistency of contraceptive use.

Background

Tabulations from the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth show that women without a high school degree complete their fertility with about one more child on average than women with a college degree. Less educated women also have their first child earlier, and are much more likely to have their children outside of marriage. The number, timing, and context of births are affected by the values women use to guide their family formation decisions, the opportunity structure available to them (which affects the opportunity cost of time out of employment for children), and the degree to which they are successful in controlling their fertility. These factors may explain socioeconomic differentials in fertility and its timing.

Values. Speaking to the first of these factors, Kathryn Edin and Maria Kefalas argue in their forthcoming book (*Promises I Can Keep: Why Poor Women Put Motherhood Before Marriage*) that low-income women (and men) place a higher value on having children. The book is full of poignant testimonials by poor women about how their children are the only source of meaning in their lives. The General Social Survey shows that those with low education are more likely to say that people without children live meaningless lives. Low SES women are likely not to find work that gives meaning to their lives, and thus look for it in children.

Opportunity Costs. Focusing on the pecuniary side of things, in *Treatise on the Family*, Gary Becker puts forward what has been referred to as the "Columbia-Chicago cost-of-time" view of fertility. In this view, opportunity costs affect women's fertility and labor force

participation. Assuming that women will reduce employment hours somewhat or leave the labor force outright in the event of a birth, this view takes a woman's potential wage to index the cost to her of a birth. Those with higher potential wages will choose fewer children because children are more expensive for them in opportunity cost. Women from less advantaged backgrounds face different probabilities of doing well in and completing schooling, and for this and other reasons, are likely to have lower potential wages, thus rendering it less costly for them to devote time to child rearing.

Contraceptive Efficacy. Third, less educated women are poorer contraceptors (Brown and Eisenberg 1995). In a qualitative study from the 1960s, Lee Rainwater (in *And the Poor Get Children: Sex, Contraception, and Family Planning in the Working Class*) discusses the chaotic life circumstances of women in poverty that make it more difficult to adhere to family planning regimes. Class differences in contraceptive efficacy may reflect underlying differences in learned skills of self-regulation and deferred gratification of the type Oscar Lewis spoke about in coining the phrase "culture of poverty." Class differences in risky behavior (such as involvement in violence, crime, unprotected sex) may reflect socialization in chaotic or otherwise difficult circumstances. One consequence may be lower contraceptive efficacy, leading to greater unplanned fertility.

Our Analysis

We use data from the 1979 National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to examine class and education differences in planned and unplanned childbearing and to test hypotheses about these three possible explanations of SES differences in fertility. The NLSY includes a rich set of questions that allow us to measure SES. We use three measures of SES: 1) respondents' parents' education and income, 2) scores on a general test of cognitive skills (the Armed Forces Qualifying Test—AFQT), and 3) and women's own educational attainment. Each of these measures is likely to index different aspects of SES: class differences in socialization, in parental cognitive skills and other socioeconomic advantages, in educational credentials and cognitive skills. All of these things are known to affect women's earning power, the interest level of the careers they have access to, and the husbands they have access to on the marriage market.

Using these three measures of SES, we will first document SES differences in levels, timing, and context of childbearing, as well as SES differences in ideal family size reported in the early years of the survey, education and employment experiences, marriage, and whether and when planned and unplanned births occurred. (Respondents are asked after births whether they wanted to get pregnant at the time they did; those answering yes will be considered "planned," while those saying that they wanted no more children or wanted a child later than this pregnancy will be considered "unplanned.")

Our main analysis will follow women in the NLSY from 1979 to 2002, over the entire course of their childbearing years, from the ages of 14-22 through 37-45. We run two sets of competing hazard models predicting a planned or unplanned birth in the past year. We construct a person-year file including both time-invariant variables (parental SES and AFQT) and lagged time-varying variables (we test the sensitivity of our choice of lag time), such as own education, union status, and prior childbearing. We include measures of fertility ideals reported prior to the

first birth to gauge the importance of values, and we add time-varying measures of employment hours and wages to assess the role of opportunity costs. We include both time-varying and unchanging controls such as union status and race.

We will start with models that predict these competing risks from our three measures of SES—parental SES, AFQT, and the woman's own education. Education will be treated as a changing X, updated annually, and lagged behind the dependent variable a year (we will experiment with lag times). This will establish how SES affects planned and unplanned fertility.

The next step in our analysis will be to test our three hypotheses about why SES affects fertility by entering various potential mediators of effects of SES on planned or unplanned fertility:

Values. If class differences in fertility result from class differences in the (nonpecuniary) value placed on children as sources of meaning in life, this leads to the prediction that SES will affect planned (not unplanned) fertility. Moreover, some of the effect should be mediated by the ideal family size the respondent gave at the early survey date, and possibly by expected fertility reports prior to the pregnancy (these are updated regularly in the data).

Opportunity cost. SES may affect fertility mainly through the higher potential wage—and thus pecuniary opportunity cost—of women from higher class backgrounds, who have more cognitive skills, and who get more schooling. This rational choice framework clearly suggests that effects of SES will be on planned fertility, and that they should be mediated by higher employment and actual wages.

Contraceptive Efficacy. If SES affects fertility because it contributes to less self-regulation and organization for future goals, then this would predict effects of SES on unplanned fertility resulting from inconsistent or lack of contraception, and this should hold even net of fertility ideals.

References

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