

Extended Abstract

Family Formation over the Life Course – 23 Years of Family Histories among the Adult Population in Denmark.

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Topic

The main purpose of this paper is to describe the course of the family formation process among the adult population in Denmark in the early phase of the adulthood; a period of the life course where most of the demographic events happens, e.g. partnership formation, childbirth, marriage and divorce.

The overall goal of the study is to determine whether it is possible to speak of a normal family formation pattern as a “stable” family history during the life course as opposed to more “turbulent” patterns with regards to this process.

The main emphasis lies on family histories as they progress for approximately 85.000 men and women born in 1962, from the year this birth cohort turns eighteen and until they turn forty-three. Analyses are based on data from Danish public registers, containing information on the entire Danish population in a twenty-three year period, from 1980 to 2003.

Some of the questions this paper seeks to answer are how the family course in relation to couple formation and dissolution as well as phases of single living is structured and whether it is correct that a sequence of pre-marital cohabitations are common before having children, the so-called serial monogamy, or if this family formation sequence is limited to a specific group of people. Overall, analyses are thought to determine whether the changed conditions for families and new patterns for household compositions during the Second Demographic Transition have made it possible to identify new patterns of the family formation process with regards to the course of events.

Where most studies seem to focus on one or a few of these key demographic events, this paper aims to describe and capture not only the number of these classic demographic events during this part of the life course but also the sequence in which they happen as well as the time between the events. Furthermore analyses take into account the timing of the events in relation to other common life event in this phase of the life course, e.g. completion of education.

The analyses presented in this paper is a part of an ongoing PhD project in which the description of the family formation patterns during the twenty-three years and the determination of “stable” and “turbulent” family formation patterns forms the basis of further analyses. In the planned future analyses the aim is to include a number of socio-demographic variables that are known to influence the demographic behaviour. This part of the study seeks to determine whether these factors have the same importance when the entire course of the family formation process is taken into account.

Data material and research methods

Analyses are based on data from The Socio-Demographic Database which contains information on the entire Danish population. Data stems from the Danish public registers, and information on the most important demographic events in the period from 1980 to 2003 is available.

Information in the Danish registers includes a personal and unique identification number which makes it possible to link information from different registers, and this enables this longitudinal description that is necessary to identify and analyse new patterns in the family formation process.

For the demographic events the database contains information on the exact date of the incidence which makes it possible to describe the life course and exact changes in these demographic components.

With regards to the demographic events the database contains information on births, migrations, change of residence within the country, changes in marital status, on citizenship as well as on deaths.

Furthermore the Socio-Demographic Database provides information on a number of background variables, e.g. family type and -status, education, occupation, socio-economic status, employment and income as well as information on type of housing. For background variables there is information as of January 1st in the period mentioned above.

The analyses presented in this paper is based on a sub sample from this database, containing every person born in 1962 who at some point between January 1st 1980 and January 1st 2003 had a unique person number or who received a residential permit and thereby a unique person number. This means that also foreign born people who immigrate to Denmark and receive a unique person number at some time in this period are included in the population. Emigrants are also included in the population till the date they emigrate for a period of more than two turns of the year, at which point they are censored out of the population.

The study population consists of approximately 85.000 men and women born in 1962 and the paper describes their family histories from January 1st the year they turn eighteen till January 1st the year they turn forty-three. The demographic components births and changes in marital status are key events in the analyses. With regards to the marital status the analyses takes into account that same sex marriages is allowed in Denmark. In addition to these components the analyses takes into account the background variable regarding family type as this variable makes it possible to identify cohabiting couples as well as making it possible to distinguish between cohabiting couples with and without joint children.

The research methods used in this part of the study are simple descriptive methods.

Theoretical focus and the expected findings

The theoretical basis of this paper has its offspring in the theory of the Second Demographic Transition as first formulated by Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa (1987, 2004).

Lesthaeghe and van de Kaa ascribe the changes in the demographic behaviour occurring from the end of the 1960s and onwards - that is postponement of marriage and childbirth, an increase in divorce rates as well as the rise of new family forms - to a change in the value orientation amongst the European population and as these changes first occurred in the Scandinavian countries and were happening as the study population in this paper was growing up and about to form their own families, this theoretic perspective is highly relevant.

Is it indeed recognised among other scholars that a long line of aspects regarding the family composition and formation as well as its functions have changed during the twentieth century. The second theoretical basis of the present study is constituted by theories regarding this change in the function of the family and of love and relationships in a post-modern society. Here focus is on the family as a sanctuary of intimacy as well as the only place in a post-modern society an individual has a chance of being recognized as a unique person. In addition love is stressed as a more important part of life in the present time and therefore ever more difficult (Dencik 2005; Bäck-Wiklund and Bernsten 1999; Berger and Berger 1983, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, Giddens 1994).

Earlier studies on demographic behaviour seem to be characterized by being an up-to-the-minute account, some times compared to accounts of earlier times and when family

histories are included these seems to be linked to a single given event (See e.g. Erlangsen and Andersson 2001; Mulder 2003).

This former research will however have a large influence on this present study, as the results and theoretical explanations of the interplay between these different demographic changes play a very important role with regards to both the choice of aspects included in the description of the family formation patterns as well as in the subsequent analyses in an attempt to explain the findings presented in this paper.

At this point in time the expected findings are mere speculations as analyses are still in the very early phase.

It is however anticipated that there will be a large variety in the family formation patterns both due to the large number of demographic aspects included in the study and to the above mentioned changes in family compositions and functions during the last decades.

With that said, I expect that there will be a fairly large group of people whose family formation pattern can be characterised as rather normal and stabile, that is with a traditional sequence of the events in question: marriage and thereafter the birth of two children in average. There is however a reasonable chance that the most common sequence will turn out to include both time living in a single household as well as in a cohabiting union, since both the experience of living alone before with a partner and the experience of living in a cohabitation before a potential marriage are very widespread in Denmark among young people. Furthermore a reasonably large portion of the children born in Denmark have parents who are not married at the time of the birth but who often eventually marry. This aspect may well influence the results as well.

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