

Generational differences in childbearing within marriage

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The type and timing of family formation has seen rapid change over the past 30 years. Changes in family processes such as cohabitation, divorce and exnuptial childbearing have lead to a greater diversity at the societal and individual levels. At the societal level there are a greater number of family types at any one point in time. Individuals may move through several different family types throughout their life course.

Traditional demographic measures of fertility and fertility behaviour are based on the premise that couples re-evaluate their desire for children after the birth of each child. Where couples have children from previous relationships the decision-making process is different as “each partner has a unique fertility history” (Stewart, 2002: 182). Fertility in higher-order (second or higher) partnerships can be a function of normative childbearing (where partners have no previous children) or can be seen as a symbolic commitment to the new relationship. There is conflicting evidence as to the effect of these two propositions, often referred to as the ‘parenthood effect’ or the ‘commitment effect’. Some studies find evidence of a commitment effect where a couple has a child in order to show commitment to that relationship irrespective of the number of previous children (Griffith et al 1985; Vikat et al. 1999). Other studies find that the existence of two or more stepchildren reduces the probability of having a shared child. (Buber & Prskawetz, 2000; Thomson et al., 2000).

This paper addresses this issue by seeking to measure the patterns of childbearing in relation to marriage. To do this we explore the extent to which children are born within marriage, across more than one marriage, and the timing of births in relation to marriage. An additional consideration is the effect to which prior children and relationships impact the nature of subsequent family formation decisions. To look at the effects over time we compare across birth cohorts.

In Australia there are no studies that explore fertility in the context of relationship formation. We know little about the proportion of children born within first or later relationships, or the effect of children from previous relationships on childbearing within current relationships. One reason for this lack of research into childbearing in different relationships is because of a lack of adequate data. Relatively simple measures of parity progression are not available even for women let alone for a woman and her partner. Cohort parity progression ratios can be obtained through census information (the number of children ever born is currently collected every ten years for women). But these data do not provide the timing between births nor information on the relationship in which a birth occurred. We could reasonably expect that this information might be obtained in birth registration data, but there is a great deal of inconsistency between States and Territories in what is collected about births in other relationships (Kippen and Corr 2006). This leads to the situation where information about childbearing must be collected from large samples surveys.

To explore the links between fertility and marriage across the life course we use data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia Survey (HILDA), a nationally representative longitudinal study. The first wave of HILDA was collected in 2001 surveying over 13,000 individuals aged 15 and over. At the time of first interview respondents are asked about their prior fertility and marriage histories. Respondents are surveyed annually. HILDA contains very little information on cohabitation histories of respondents. We know if

marriages are preceded by cohabitation, the total number of cohabitations and the timing of a respondent's first cohabitation that did not lead to marriage. Unfortunately this does not allow us to explore the complexity of childbearing across different relationship types. Therefore we focus on marriage only while acknowledging this limitation especially in a country such as Australia where cohabitation is widespread.

We examine fertility and marriage across the life course focussing on the following questions:

- What proportion of first births occur before first marriage, during first marriage and after first marriage?
- Across how many relationships do individuals have children?
- How does previous issue of both partners affect fertility?

In answering each of these questions we consider the effect of cohort and gender.

References

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