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"The combinability between work and motherhood and the ideal age to have children: An analysis based on 2006-2007 European Social Survey data"

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Abstract

This paper asks whether what women perceive to be the ideal age of having children differs across countries, in line with the cross-country variation in the opportunity costs of having children. It hypothesizes that it does. Concretely, this paper hypothesizes that the lower the (perceived) opportunity costs of having children, the lower the perceived ideal age of having children, and the higher the (perceived) opportunity costs of having children, the higher the perceived ideal age of having children. This paper makes use of data from the third round of the European Social Survey (ESS), which was carried out in the period 2006-2007 in 25 European countries, and included a rotating module on the timing of major life course events.

Extended abstract

Motherhood constitutes a defining moment, a major event in a woman's life course. To an increasing extent, fertility is being postponed in industrialized countries. Reasons include the increased interest of women in self-realization through study and work and the high opportunity costs of having children. Yet these opportunity costs differ clearly across countries – because of differences across countries in the availability of day-care, flexible work arrangements and financial support, differences in perceived gender roles, etc.

This paper therefore asks whether, as a result of cross-country variation in the opportunity costs of having children, what women perceive to be the ideal age of having children also differs across countries. It hypothesizes that it does. Concretely, this paper hypothesizes that the lower the (perceived) opportunity costs of having children, the lower the perceived ideal age of having children, and the higher the (perceived) opportunity costs of having children, the higher the perceived ideal age of having children.

This paper makes use of data from the third round of the European Social Survey (ESS), which was carried out in the period 2006-2007 in 25 European countries. One of the rotating modules of that survey concerned the timing of life course events (e.g. childbearing age).

The first part of the paper consists of a brief discussion, based on ESS contact forms, of the quality of ESS survey data in general, and of the data from the rotating module on the timing of life course events in particular. Only those countries are looked at which meet a number of quality requirements (reasonable response rates, low refusal rates, minimal non-response biases). The potential of but also difficulties involved in cross-national analysis will be discussed. The second part of the paper concerns the actual data analysis. The ideal age of childbearing is related cross-nationally with respondents' socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. age, work status, educational status, partnership status), attitudinal characteristics (e.g. "age at which women are generally too young/too old to consider having children", "how important is it to have a full-time job?", etc.) and other characteristics likely to influence childbearing activities. As noted, the central research question envisaged in this paper is: Do the so-called family friendly countries exhibit

lower ideal age on childbearing and the less family friendly countries present higher ideal age on this? We expect that the easier individuals and couples perceive in having children, the lower this age is, and the more difficult it is being perceived, the higher this age is. Based on the results, the paper tries to comment upon three issues: (i) the importance on assessing the data quality and interpreting data results; and (ii) which variables seem to affect the result on ideal age of childbearing and as to whether this selection of variables differ by country; and (iii) infer what areas are particularly important for women to lower the age for childbearing.