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EMERGING TRENDS: FAMILY FORMATION AND GENDER

Abstract

Family formation is a well-studied topic in demography and the social sciences. Yet, open questions to be addressed by future research remain. In this essay, we focus on the childbearing side of family formation. We are discussing how a gendered lens, which led researchers to concentrate on women's experiences, has shaped previous studies. We argue that future research can be advanced by: (1) going beyond this perspective and addressing men and their experiences pertaining to work and family; and by (2) broadening research on couples in order to understand how his and her resources, values and experiences interact in relating to family formation. Furthermore, we discuss (3) the relevance of incorporating a larger array of macro-level factors into studies on family formation, such as regulations affecting the practical and daily lives of families, or the cultural context of emotions; and (4) which methodological advances are needed to address the complexity of the studied processes.

Introduction

Family formation is at the heart of the metabolism of human societies. Yet, there is no clear-cut definition of the family. The UN and the US Census define the family as a household of two or more people 'related by birth, marriage or adoption' (US CENSUS, UN), while the OECD distinguishes between 'couple families', including married and cohabiting couples, and other family forms with children (OECD 2015). Others have argued that families are increasingly spanning over more than just one household, and that household-based definitions miss these spatially spread family forms (Teachman et al. 2000, Cherlin 2010). Whatever the definition, this makes it obvious that family formation entails two processes, the formation of unions among adults and the birth (or adoption) of the first and subsequent children.

In this piece, we will reflect on the current state of demographic and sociological research on family formation and discuss areas in which we see special potential for future investigation. There is a vast amount of research on both union formation and particularly childbearing behavior, investigating current and past trends and their antecedents and consequences in many countries and cultures across the world. We will concentrate on the literature related to childbearing, discuss union formation only in passing, and limit our (geographic) scope to couples and families in advanced societies.

Women and Men

Over the last several decades, Western developed countries have witnessed enormous changes in family-related behaviors, evidenced by a gradual weakening of the ties between childbearing and marriage formation, increases in cohabitation and non-marital childbearing, postponement of the transition to parenthood, and a general decline in total fertility rates below replacement (Frejka and Sobotka 2008, Cherlin 2010). In response, much of the empirical research in the field of the family tried to understand the driving forces behind these changes. This research has largely focused on women's behaviors. It investigated why women increasingly opt for cohabitation instead of marriage, studied transitions from cohabitation into marriage and how these are linked with childbearing, tried to understand why women postpone their entry into motherhood, and why they have fewer births than in the past. For a long time, however, little attention has been paid to men. Guided largely by the economic reasoning of the family shaped by Becker and his collaborators (Willis 1973, Becker 1981) it was assumed that men's roles in the family were confined to breadwinning while most important decisions regarding the family were made by women (Greene and Biddlecom 2000). As a result, the large majority of studies trying to understand women's childbearing behaviors focused on women's own attributes, at most 'controlling' for the male partner's characteristics such as education or earnings.

Such an approach, however, limits our full understanding of family formation choices and behaviors, as it neglects the perspective and agency of men. The interest among researchers in men and their family-related behaviours started to emerge only recently. For example, researchers started to look at how men's education, position in the labour market and earnings affect partners' conjugal and fertility choices (Blossfeld and Mills 2010, Kalmijn 2011) and how the rapid increase in women's educational attainment, now surpassing that of men in many advanced nations, affect men's (and women's) opportunities to find a partner (De Hauw et al. 2015). Increasingly more research is conducted on trends in and determinants of men's involvement in the family (Hook 2006, Prince Cooke and Baxter 2010, Kan et al. 2011) as well as its consequences for continued childbearing (Brodmann et al. 2007, Cooke 2009, Duvander et al. 2010, Bernhardt et al. 2014).

Yet, more research on men in the field of family formation is needed, for example on the question of how men perceive and experience the benefits from and costs of forming a family. It should also inform us on how these costs and benefits shape men's intentions to form a union or have a (the next) child. Previous research has found that the stability of men's employment and men's earnings have strong and positive effects on family formation (Blossfeld and Mills 2010, Kalmijn 2011). We know little, however, on whether and how these effects have been changing over time and how they vary across countries. For instance, has the positive effect of men's labour market outcomes on men's family formation become less positive over time? If so, could this be linked to changes in gender relations within the couple as women's contributions to the household budget have been increasing and men have become more involved in childcare? Or conversely, have they become stronger as the low educated men with poor earnings prospects are becoming less likely to form a family at all? Evidence for such a development has been found for instance for Belgium (Trimarchi and Van Bavel 2015). What is the role of other factors for shaping men's family-related behaviours, i.e. the desire to remain free and uncommitted or the desire to have a certain amount of leisure time?

We also need to better understand why men remain less involved in housework and childcare than women. This persistence of the gender gap in housework and childcare despite the closing gender disparities in employment results in work-family tensions experienced by women and has been argued to be one of the important factors suppressing fertility (Esping-Andersen and Billari 2015, Goldscheider et al. 2015). Past research focused mainly on the gender gap in housework and looked largely on the role of factors which support or inhibit women's labour force participation. Extending the discussion from housework to childcare as well as extending the array of possible determinants to other areas (e.g. factors which inhibit men's involvement in the family) could shed more light on the gender disparities in involvement at home.

Couples

The large majority of children today are born to couples who live together at the time of the birth of the child, either married or in cohabitation (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). Decision-making about whether to have a baby thus falls in the realm of both partners, often being a joint decision of him and her. This implies that studying linkages between her or his socio-economic resources such as education or employment and childbearing individually will likely not capture the underlying process fully, since partners and interactive processes between the partners are excluded from this perspective. Since the 1990s, a growing body of literature explicitly addressed how interactive dynamics between partners may affect childbearing behavior. What we know is that among couples his and her fertility desires and intentions both appear to matter and predict childbearing behavior of the couple in an additive and interactive way (Thomson et al 1990; Testa et al 2014), and increasingly, studies investigate the underlying decision-making mechanisms among the partners. They suggest, for example, that the relative weight of her and his intentions on subsequent births varies by parity (Bauer and Kneip 2014) or that either partner appears to have a 'veto' power when he or she does not desire any further children but the partner does (Bauer and Kneip 2013). Also, the relationship between education, occupation or income and childbearing behavior has been shown to vary conditional on the education or other socio-economic resources of the partner (Dribe and Stanfors 2010; Corijn et al. 1996). These studies suggests, for instance, that homogamous highly educated couples have larger second or third birth hazards in some European countries (Kreyenfeld 2002, Nitsche et al. 2015). Yet, there remain many open questions in the couple-focused childbearing literature. First, the available studies cannot tell us whether these couples are less likely to postpone childbearing or have more children in general and hence more research which distinguishes between the timing and the actual occurrence of events is needed. Second, future studies should investigate in greater detail whether differences in childbearing behavior of certain combinations of 'power couples' (Dribe and Stanfors 2010) may be due to when these couples form their unions and have their children or due to how stable their unions are. Third, we still know little about the underlying mechanisms of how and why the partners' socio-economic resources play together in couples' childbearing decision-making. Additional studies are necessary to investigate these mechanisms in greater detail. They include testing whether certain groups of couples may differ in how much they outsource domestic and care work, whether they are matched to a larger degree on family and gender norm attitudes, or whether they may display systematic differences in relationship satisfaction, conflict resolution strategies, or value consensus. Fourth, since the focus in this literature has rather been on highly educated couples with

women who work, we still know little about whether these couple dynamics operate differently among couples with lower levels of resources. Fifth, not much is known on whether the relationship between resources and childbearing behaviors and its underlying mechanisms vary between married and cohabiting couples or between same-sex and heterosexual couples.

Methodological Challenges

The quantitative methods and models used in the literature on family formation have up to about the mid-1990s mainly investigated singular outcomes – be it isolated events in the life course such as first marriage or birth, single individuals such as women or men, or separate layers of social structure such as individual outcomes on the micro level or aggregate phenomena on the macro level. This has since changed: Methods have been developed to integrate and analyze the complexity of social processes more holistically. In the field of family formation, researchers started to acknowledge (1) the interdependency of several parallel or sequential processes by modelling them jointly in the framework of multi-process models as theoretically discussed in the life-course perspective (Elder 2003), (2) interdependencies between individuals or meso-level units nested in the same social context, using multi-level models (Billingsley and Ferrarini 2014, Testa 2014), and (3) the interconnectedness of family members, partners or other meaningfully connected pairs or groups of individuals using dyad models, as suggested in the linked lives paradigm (Miller et al. 2004, Keizer and Schenk 2012). Increasingly, greater effort is also being made to evaluate effects of policies on family formation after accounting for selection of individuals into the group of persons eligible to make use of a given policy (e.g. Rindfuss et al 2010). In addition, investigations of how complex individual-level choices interact with each other to produce macro-level phenomena have been brought forward. While hazard models provide us with information on which variables affect the transition of interest, they do not inform us to what extent these variables contribute to producing population-level phenomena. Micro-simulation techniques and agent-based-models were used for this purpose (Rindfuss et al. 2010, Diaz et al. 2011, Thomson et al. 2012). While these methods are great achievements and have led to many new insights, they are not without limitations and further developments in the methodological realm of family formation studies are necessary.

For instance, (1) multi-process models helped us to better understand the causal relations between individual's behaviors and observe how choices in one life sphere affect individuals' behaviours in another sphere. This method allows to account for selection of individuals into the population at risk of experiencing an event (e.g. most persons who are at risk of a first birth have formed a partnership first). It also controls for the unobserved characteristics of individuals which jointly affect individuals' behaviours in several life spheres which may confound the observed relationships between those life spheres if they are not accounted for. But multi-process models also have certain drawbacks which seriously limit possibilities for their application. First of all, the estimation process is computationally very intensive, the time needed for estimation increases exponentially with an increase in the number of processes studied and often leads to convergence problems. Second, identification of multi-process models usually requires repeated events and relies on the assumption that the unobserved heterogeneity term is constant over time. More research is thus needed in order to

eliminate these shortcomings. One step in this direction can be the use of Bayesian estimation techniques like MCMC, as it was proposed by Gottard et al. (2015).

The application of of multi-level models (2&3) allowed to account for the interdependency of observations, which are nested in the same setting, e.g. family, household, region or country and thus share some similar characteristics which may otherwise not be easily captured by researchers. This approach also contributed strongly to our understanding of how the social context affects union formation and birth transitions. So far, most of the research concentrated on the effects of the country-specific context on individual behaviours (Soons and Kalmijn 2009, Billingsley and Ferrarini 2014, Testa 2014), more recently, however, multi-level models have increasingly been used to account for interdependencies of partnered individuals and to study cross-over effects, i.e. effects of the characteristics of partners on fertility intentions (Miller et al. 2004) or union satisfaction (Keizer and Schenk 2012). This enables the modeling of explicit couple level effects whilst modeling interactive effects between the partners themselves and a wider use of this method would tremendously enrich the couple-centered literature. More attention is, however, needed in the future applications of the multi-level models as pooling of countries, regions or couples introduces a great deal of between-unit (e.g. between-country or between-couple) variation. Decomposition of the total effects into within-unit and between-unit effects is recommended to avoid producing estimates which are confounded by between-country variation in the dependent and independent variables.

Finally, future methodological developments in the field of family formation are needed in order to disentangle between timing and quantum effects. Whereas some individuals may only postpone union formation or entry to parenthood, others may never experience it. A failure to distinguish between the postponement and non-occurrence of the event makes it difficult to conclude whether the predictor variables considered in the models only lead to a delay in the occurrence of the studied event or whether they prevent it from ever occurring. For instance, event history models may tell us that highly educated women are usually more likely to postpone the first birth, but they do not inform us whether they are also more likely to remain childless.

Culture and Macro-Level Factors

Family formation processes are embedded in the whole of the surrounding social context. It has long been theorized in demographic thinking and shown in empirical applications that social structure and culture are significantly linked to family formation behavior. Yet, it's recently been argued that culture is much more than single social norms or institutionalized practices, namely that culture "is an interdependent web of meanings that is structured in consequential ways" (Bacharach 2014: 5). We follow Bacharach in arguing that while many cultural aspects, specifically more easily measurable components such as social policies or single norms, have already been incorporated into family formation analysis, "the importance of culture for demographic outcomes" (ibid.) hasn't been fully appreciated yet in research on family formation and much work remains to be done in that area. This applies both to how cultural aspects have been conceptualized, e.g. rather in single pieces ('norms', 'institutions') than from a more holistic perspective, as well as to missing cultural elements that may widen our understanding of how culture shapes family formation behaviors and how cross-national differences in family formation may come about (Bacharach 2014). In the following section,

we discuss emerging trends in a very specific and well-studied area of macro-level structure, namely social policies. Thereafter, we'll present our ideas regarding the much more neglected cultural context of emotions.

Macro-Level Factors: Social Policies

Much attention has been paid to institutional elements such as work-family reconciliation policies, which, at least theoretically, are designed to lower opportunity costs of parenting and therefore expected to have an impact on specifically childbearing behavior. Researchers looked into effects on fertility of childcare provision, maternity and parental leave schemes, availability and quality of part-time employment, or workplace policies. These studies either found conflicting evidence or only small positive effects of reconciliation policies on fertility. Furthermore, it remained unclear whether studied policies affected only the timing of births or the number of children eventually born (Gauthier 2007, Kalwij 2010, Thevenon and Gauthier 2011). It thus seems there are many other factors, largely unaddressed in research, which affect how individuals and couples can reconcile work and family and, in extension, impact couples' decisions of whether to add a/n (additional) child to their family. They include regulations affecting matters of the practical and daily life of families, specifically those which can contribute to turning attending to a career and childrearing simultaneously into a more stressful and mutually exclusive endeavor. These are, for instance, poor commuting infrastructure, lengthening travel-time between the workplace and the home (Huinink and Feldhaus 2012), rigid regulations on opening hours limiting access to supermarkets or services such as post offices, health care or extracurricular activities for children. Such rigidities may gain in importance with increasing expectations toward parents to invest in their children (Leigh et al. 2012) and in the "work-devotion" cultures where long working hours and devotion to paid work are highly rewarded (Blair-Loy 2003). While representative data on these issues is not readily available, it can be collected and would further advance our understanding of the impact of institutional and macro-level cultural factors on family formation.

The Cultural Context of Emotions

Another cultural aspect, largely neglected to date in sociology and demography in general and the research on family formation in particular, is the role of emotions, both on the individual and on the macro level (Massey 2002). Emotions likely play a chief role in relationship formation and childbearing-considerations of individuals and couples (Basu 2006), given that they have been shown to be important for other decision-making processes (Isen and Means 1983, Loewenstein 2000). On the individual level, emotions such as a desire for a baby ("baby fever") may drive the decision to try to become pregnant (Brase and Brase 2012). Drops in subjective well-being of parents around the time of their first birth in Germany have for instance been shown to be predictive for a depressed second birth hazards later on (Margolis and Myrskylä 2015). Yet, subjective emotional experiences are a largely neglected but perhaps central piece in understanding variance in childbearing behavior, both within and between countries. We suggest that even more fruitful for broadening our understanding of what drives cross cultural differences in family formation behaviors may be paying more attention to emotion and emotional expression and management as a cultural phenomenon on the macro level. While there is debate in social psychology on whether emotions are biologically innate or socially constructed, it's been argued that subjective emotional experiences don't develop in a vacuum but that they are influenced by their social

surroundings (Thoits 1989, Turner 2009). Cultures appear to have distinct ideas of how emotions should be dealt with and can be acceptably expressed and regulated (Jenkins and Karno 1992, Bowie et al. 2013). We therefore think that investigating emotion-culture may hold one of the keys for a deeper understanding of for example the way parents emotionally perceive the upbringing of their first child in the social context they live in. Teaching young children emotional regulation and coping with their emotional displays, particularly in public spaces, may be perceived as more or less stressful to parents dependent upon the emotional culture of the society. The emotional culture may affect how accepting and supportive others - from grandparents, teachers, service personnel in public places to bystanders and strangers - may react to children and emotional interactions between parents and children. For instance, if parents perceive handling children in public as stressful due to repeated reactions which are perceived as unfriendly and unsupportive, they may be less inclined to progress to having an additional child. This could be a factor in understanding variations in second birth progressions across Europe. While survey data used for demographic analysis sometimes includes questions on the emotional states and experiences of individuals, we don't know of any survey data providing information on emotional culture or norms pertaining to emotional expression and regulation. Thus, we suggest that future studies and data collection should attempt to expand on the array of possible contextual and cultural factors which may affect work-family conflict.

Conclusions and Outlook

In this reflection on current and future relevant directions of research on family formation, we have covered a few areas in which we see specific potential for further developments. This means that we made a deliberate selection based on our very own interests and perceptions, and does not imply that the areas we haven't discussed are at all of less relevance. They include topics such as the diversification of family forms, for example homosexual families or step-families and adoptions, network influences on family formation behaviors, and research on the biological underpinnings of and their relevance for union formation and childbearing behaviors.

We'd like to close with a comment on implicit and hidden assumptions, a comment which applies to future developments in all research areas alike. As has been pointed out long ago, theories and approaches to empirical research in the behavioral sciences usually build on assumptions, and only some of those are made explicit, while others remain unsaid and sometimes unreflected upon (Slife and Williams 1995). We'd like to encourage ourselves and other social scientists and family demographers to challenge ourselves and become more aware of and explicit about those unreflected assumptions we have yet which likely shape our selection of topics to study, research questions, theories, methods, and interpretations of findings. For example, the previously pronounced concentration of family formation research on women in both data collections and empirical studies was likely based on the socially constructed idea that women are primarily responsible for childbearing and childrearing and thus need to be in the focus of this type of research. Of course this is not the case and the field has been changing accordingly to increasingly include data collection and studies on men and couple dynamics. Taking the idea of gendered 'separate spheres' as a given reality may have been overcome in family demography in the 21st century. Yet we believe that thinking deeply about which implicit assumption remain and are guiding our choices in the research we

conduct every day may help us to opening up new directions and perspectives in family demography and beyond.

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