

Fertility Postponement: Cultural Dynamics or Structural Change?

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AIM OF THE PAPER

Cultural and economic theories of demographic change interpret the changing patterns of nuptiality and fertility that have emerged since the mid 1960s as coherent emanations of a shift in the ideational domain, or conversely, as the inevitable outcome of a limited set of economic principles. According to neo-classic economic theory, postponement of marriage, the decline of proportions ever marrying and the increase of divorce reflect the reduction in gains of marriage for women. Similarly, postponement of fertility and the emergence of subreplacement fertility reflect the high opportunity cost associated with parenthood for an increasing number of women (Becker, 1981). The explanation offered by the neo-economic approach is essentially structural: 'the alteration of preferences and opportunities that result from either changes in positions that individuals occupy – individual social mobility – or from reshuffling of resources associated with a given social position – structural social mobility or redistribution of wealth – are seen as the cause of behavioral changes' (Palloni, 2001). Because tastes or preferences are considered to be stable and endogenous, differences in demographic behavior between individuals or changes in behavior over time are the result of different opportunities and opportunity costs. In the neo-classic economic argument, tastes and preferences are reduced to endogenous factors in the explanation of demographic behavior. By contrast, changing tastes and preferences are accredited a prominent role in cultural explanations of demographic change. Postponement and decline of marriage, increasing divorce, rise in unmarried cohabitation, postponement of fertility and the emergence of structural subreplacement fertility are referred to by Lesthaeghe and Van De Kaa as the second demographic transition (Lesthaeghe and Van De Kaa, 1986). These changes in demographic behaviour are subsequently related to the rising aspirations of younger generations towards consumption, the increasing importance attached to the quality of life, an increasing taste for leisure and the rise of post-materialist values such as self-realization and freedom of speech. In this line of theorizing, tastes and preferences are considered to be exogenous variables, subject to their own dynamics.

In this article, the claims of cultural and economic arguments in the explanation of demographic change are investigated using longitudinal data for Belgium. More

specifically, cohort data are used to investigate whether the postponement of fertility – partially responsible for the bust of period fertility indicators in the mid 1970s – is driven by cultural change and has to be considered as the hallmark of the second demographic transition, or alternatively, whether postponement of fertility merely reflects the structural changes such as increasing female educational attainment and labor force participation.

DATA

The analysis uses anonymous individual level data drawn from the 1991 census. For 3,013,051 women born between 1921 and 1975 the census provides information on the date of the first marriage, parity and the maternity history as well as information on background variables such as educational attainment, labor force participation and place of residence. The maternity histories in the 1991 census are complemented by the histories of marital status drawn from the National Register. This unique body of data offers the possibility to monitor patterns of nuptiality and fertility among women having similar characteristics over an extended period of time between the early 1940s and 1990. All indicators in the analysis are calculated retrospectively. Validation of the indicators obtained from the 1991 census and the National Register against measures drawn from vital registration indicates that the bias associated with the retrospective design is limited. Period indicators such as the total fertility rate and the mean age at childbearing can be reliably reconstructed from retrospective data between 1960 and 1990. Similarly, cohort completed fertility levels and cohort mean ages at childbearing are reliable for cohorts born between 1918 and 1951, although data quality improves noticeably for cohorts born after 1931. Deviations do emerge, however, between the order-specific fertility measures calculated from the 1991 census and order-specific measures drawn from vital registration as a result of diverging definitions of birth-order: the order-specific measures drawn from the 1991 census refer to biological or natural order of birth whereas vital registration statistics classify births according to their order in the current marriage. As a result, vital registration consistently yields proportions of first order births and lower proportions of higher-order births because subsequent births to the same mother are both classified as first births if they occur in subsequent marriages. With respect to nuptiality, retrospective calculation yields an overestimation of the period total female first marriage rate starting from the mid 1960s. As far as cohort data are concerned, validation against series drawn from vital registration suggests that female first marriage propensities are overestimated by roughly 1 per cent for the more recent cohorts of women born after 1945. Unfortunately, the 1991 census does not provide data on cohabitation or entry into consensual unions. The analysis on the quality of demographic data in the 1991 census indicates that information concerning parity, first marriage and the maternity history is generally poorer for foreign women. As a result, the analyses in the subsequent sections are confined to women having the Belgian nationality on March 1st 1991, excluding non-response

and women with inconsistencies in their histories of marital status or maternity histories.

METHODOLOGY

The results are obtained through the reconstruction of cohort patterns of nuptiality and fertility for subsequent five-year cohorts born between 1921 and 1975. Subsequently, the aggregate cohort profiles are broken down by educational attainment, labour force participation and regional settings. Five educational levels are used in the analysis: 1) no education and primary education, 2) lower secondary education, 3) higher secondary education, 4) short type higher or tertiary education (3 years) and 5) long type higher education and university education. Women with an unknown level of education are included with lower secondary education. The differentiation in terms of labor force participation uses a dichotomy between women who never took up paid work and women who ever worked. The operationalization is crude, but the detailed reconstruction of spells of labor force participation and inactivity between ages 14 and 49 is not feasible using the 1991 census. To allow for regional specificity, patterns of nuptiality and fertility are reconstructed separately for Flanders, Brussels and Wallonia. Previous analysis on Belgian nuptiality and fertility patterns illustrate that the language border between the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking part of the country acted as a firebreak on the diffusion of marital fertility control at the end of the 19th century (Lesthaeghe, 1977). The same pattern emerged more recently with high frequencies of unmarried cohabitation, extramarital fertility and divorce in Wallonia and Brussels and low frequencies in Flanders (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002). The comparison of women having similar levels of educational attainment and labor force participation across regions serves as an indication of the effect of regional subcultures on demographic behavior.

CONCLUSIONS

Fragmentation and heterogeneity are the foremost conclusions emerging from the longitudinal reconstruction of nuptiality and fertility patterns of Belgian women. Although the rise in divorce, unmarried cohabitation and extramarital fertility, the postponement of family formation and the emergence of subreplacement fertility occur simultaneously at the aggregate level, different groups of women are involved and different explanations are needed to account for these trends. In Belgium, three trends can be discerned in the demographic landscape after 1960. The first trend – postponement of first and second births – is driven by increasing educational attainment and labor force participation of women over the period considered and is largely invariant to regional settings. Postponement of fertility thus requires a structural explanation. The reconstruction of cohort fertility patterns also indicates that changes in the quantum of first and second births associated with changes in the timing of fertility are limited. The second trend- the decline of proportions marrying together with the rise of unmarried cohabitation and

extramarital fertility – reflects a rising taste for alternative living arrangements. This trend is associated with increasing secularization and changing values orientations. As a result, changes in nuptiality and extramarital fertility are characterized by a pronounced regional pattern with high frequencies in Wallonia and Brussels and a more traditional outlook in Flanders. Although the rise in divorce cannot be documented as precisely using retrospective data, the reconstruction of cohort profiles suggests that both increasing labor force participation – enhanced financial autonomy of women – and cultural factors – strong regional variations controlling for educational attainment and labour force participation – affect divorce levels. The third trend – the decline of third and higher order birth resulting in structural subreplacement fertility – escapes both cultural and structural explanations. The progression to third and higher order births declined substantially for all groups of women born after 1935 regardless educational attainment, labor force participation of regional settings.

In contrast to the claims made by cultural and economic explanations of demographic change, the longitudinal data for Belgian women born between 1931 and 1975 indicate that changes in nuptiality and fertility since the mid 1960s do not make up a consistent pattern at the individual level. The pattern of ‘postponed’ fertility can be traced back to higher educated, working women born in the early 1920s. Postponement of fertility thus precedes the rise in divorce, the decline of proportions marrying and the rise in unmarried cohabitation. The rise of unmarried cohabitation only emerges for the more recent birth cohorts born in the early 1950s and particularly the early 1960s. Unlike the postponement of fertility, unmarried cohabitation and extramarital fertility are also characterised by strong regional contrasts. Finally, the reconstruction of fertility patterns indicates that the emergence of subreplacement fertility is not driven by the postponement of fertility but rather by the reduction of third and higher births and that this evolution is independent of trends in nuptiality and shifts in the timing of lower-order births. In conclusion, the concept of the second demographic transition rightly draws attention to the fact that nuptiality and fertility changed profoundly since the mid 1960s and to the fact that the trends in most cases constitute trend reversals as compared to the first demographic transition. The regional patterning of unmarried cohabitation, extramarital fertility and divorce in Belgium also suggests that cultural factors play an important role in demographic change. The assumption that fertility postponement is driven by the same cultural factors, however, cannot be corroborated.

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