

Education and the Family Life Course

Elizabeth Thomson, Maria Winkler-Dworak and Sheela Kennedy¹

2008-09-14

Abstract

Education is a key resource for advantages in two core domains of life, economic success and stability, and health, well-being and longevity. The gap between the less well and better educated on both dimensions accumulates over the life course, though the size of the gap and the degree of accumulation varies across societies. Beyond wealth and health, most people aspire to a stable and nurturing family life. We know a great deal about relationships between education and specific family transitions, but less about cumulative family experiences of those with more or less education. This paper identifies pathways to a standard family life course, i.e., the life course that most people believe is advantageous for individuals and societies. It examines educational differences in France, Sweden and the USA in critical junctures along the path, for younger and older cohorts and for women and men.

Extended Abstract

A fundamental principal of life course theory and research is that circumstances and events early in life have life-long implications for an individual's opportunities, choices and outcomes (Elder, Johnson & Krosnoe 2003; Mayer 2005). Pathways from childhood through young adulthood to adult economic attainments have been intensively studied. Research on the consequences of early life experiences for adult health and survival is more recent but already quite well developed. When it comes to a third key component of the life course – attainment of a stable and nurturing family life – we have a considerable portfolio on relationships between early life experience and particular family transitions in adulthood. But we do not have the cumulative picture of family experience over the life course as has been developed for wealth and health.

Educational attainment is the key marker of advantage on the threshold of the adult life course. Education is without doubt the most important determinant of economic well-being later in life. Education is also strongly associated with better health throughout life and greater longevity. Furthermore, the gap between the less well and better educated on both dimensions appears to accumulate over the life course. Differences by education in the timing or occurrence of most family transitions – cohabitation and marriage, childbearing, separation – are also well documented. It is less clear, however, that education produces a smooth pathway toward the most advantaged or normative family life course.

Pathways through the family life course

In the conjugal family systems that characterize European and other wealthy countries, partnership and parenthood are the key dimensions of family life courses. The standard

¹ Elizabeth Thomson, Stockholm University and University of Wisconsin-Madison; Sheela Kennedy, University of Minnesota; Maria Winkler-Dworak, Vienna Institute of Demography.

family life course in such societies consists of finding an intimate partner, having children with that partner, and remaining with the partner until death. What is termed the Second Demographic Transition – increases in cohabitation, non-union births and union dissolution combined with falling fertility – suggests that the standard has weakened and that family transitions are increasingly de-standardized.

Certainly the behavioral changes that comprise the Second Demographic Transition are accompanied by increasing acceptance of alternative pathways through family life. Europeans do not in general agree that “a long-term relationship is needed to be happy in life”. Although greater agreement is found on the importance for children of having a mother and father, several surveys show quite high acceptance of having a child without a partner or in a cohabiting relationship, even in countries where only a small proportion of births occur out of marriage (Thomson 2005). It is important to keep in mind that such questions are not designed to identify personal preferences or ideals with respect to partnership formation and stability. Indeed, the fact that questions about partnership ideals do not exist in national surveys suggests an underlying assumption that almost everyone would agree that stable partnerships are desirable.

When it comes to having children, we have a long history of the right sort of question – what is the ideal number of children to have? Although individuals may for a variety of reasons prefer a different number for themselves, they are usually willing to express their views of a normative family size. In the most recent Eurobarometer surveys, the vast majority of respondents in their childbearing years consider two or more children ideal, with most selecting exactly two. The key exception was Austria, one of the countries with lowest-low fertility, where a substantial proportion thought one child would be ideal (Testa 2006; see also Goldstein, Lutz & Testa 2003).

Figure 1 illustrates what we see as the critical junctures in standard and non-standard family life courses. The first transition that matters is the birth of a child. One may first ‘step off’ the path to a standard family life course by having no children at all or by having the first child without a coresident partner. From the middle position, having a first child in a union, one may step off the standard pathway by separating from that partner before a second child is born. If we define the standard as having at least two children in the partnership, couples who have only one child ‘step off’ even though their partnership remains intact. Once a couple has had two children together, the final path of departure from the ideal is for that union to end. If one child is sufficient for a standard family life course, however, only the dissolution of the first parental union produced a non-standard life course. In that case, non-standard family life courses arise either from childlessness or the dissolution of a parental union, before or after birth the first birth.

Note that we ignore features of the family life course that are key components of the Second Demographic transition – cohabitation versus marriage; and dissolution of childless partnerships. We argue, first, that the significance of cohabitation for cumulative family experience lies entirely in cohabiting couples’ greater likelihood of separation compared to married couples. The end of a childless partnership may be emotionally and financially difficult, but its significance for the family life course is, we

argue, captured through subsequent events we do observe. Early union disruptions may indicate low capacity for intimate relationships and therefore be reflected in higher likelihood of the disruption of a subsequent parental union. The significance of early disruptions is also reflected in childlessness because of the time it takes to find a new partner and the ongoing experiences that may reduce preferences for children.

Education and the family life course

Why would we expect education to play a critical role in pathways through the family life course? Early in the adult life course, pursuit of higher education requires time and effort that might otherwise be devoted to developing intimate partnerships and having children. In the long run, the skills and credentials provided by education produce steady employment, higher income, social networks and problem-solving skills that can support the search for a partner and the maintenance of partner and parental relationships. At the same time, however, the economic and social opportunities created by education may complete, especially for women, with the formation and maintenance of families.

Theoretical effects of education on the formation and stability of intimate unions are usually linked to their economic base. Becker (1991) claims that the utility of marriage depends on “gains to trade” in which women specialize in home production, men in paid employment. Highly educated women are thought to have less to gain from marriage and therefore to be more likely to avoid it or to have the resources to leave an unsatisfactory marriage. An alternative view (Oppenheimer 1994) asserts that specialization leaves couples at greater risk when one or the other partner is unable to perform her/his role. Thus, high education leading to shared economic responsibility is a valued commodity for both women and men, increasing the risk of union formation and decreasing the risk of separation. Beyond the economic considerations, however, education is associated with and may provide social networks and emotional resources that facilitate union stability.

Explanations for education’s influence on childbearing are based in part on incompatibility between childrearing and paid employment. Higher educated women pay a greater price in lost earnings for becoming mothers. In addition, education provides opportunities for life experiences that may be as fulfilling as parenthood. Positive effects of education may arise because highly educated persons have more economic, social and psychological resources for rearing children, especially when social policies reduce the opportunity costs for paid employment.

Childbearing outside of marriage is theorized to arise from women possessing the minimal economic resources to raise children alone together with a limited supply of men able or willing to take on the financial burdens of married parenthood (Willis and Haaga 1996). Because highly educated women face higher opportunity costs associated with childrearing and a greater supply of potential partners with steady incomes, they may prefer to remain childless until or unless they marry (Ellwood and Jencks 2003; Willis and Haaga 1996), while less well educated women choose to have children on their own. To the extent that cohabiting fathers invest less economically in their children than

married fathers, this model also predicts a negative association between female educational attainment and the likelihood of giving birth within a cohabiting union.

As noted above, most studies of educational influences on the family life course focus on a single event. An increasing number have investigated selection processes underlying the formation and stability of unions and their relationship to childbearing. And a few have studied selection processes in the attainment of higher education and family formation. Overall, however, direct effects of education on family transitions remain when simultaneity is taken into account (e.g. Aassve et al. 2005; Brien, Lillard & Waite 1999; Coppola & DiCesare 2008).

Although educational attainment is usually associated with delayed union formation, much of that effect can be accounted for by the longer period of enrollment required to attain higher education (Baizan, Arnstein & Billari 2003; Bracher & Santow 1998; Coppola 2003). Net of enrollment, educational attainment may be positively associated with union formation, especially with the choice of marriage over cohabitation (Kravdal 1999; Statistiska centralbyrån 1996a). Positive effects are emerging or have become stronger in several wealthy countries (Goldscheider, Turcotte and Kopp 2001; Martin 2004), consistent with a resource-based, dual-earner model of union formation (Oppenheimer 1994).

Almost all research on separation and divorce finds lower risks among those with higher education (e.g., Hoem 1997; Jalovaara 2002; Olah 2001; Raley & Bumpass 2003; but see Aassve et al. 2005). Studies in Sweden (Hoem 1997) and the USA (Raley & Bumpass 2003) indicate that educational differentials in divorce have increased. Because the Swedish study did not include separations of cohabiting couples, educational differentials in union dissolution are underestimated. Cohabitors are more likely to separate than married couples (Andersson 2003) and, as noted above, the less well educated are more likely to cohabit than are those with high education.

The most comprehensive comparative data on women's education and union dissolution are from Härkönen and Dronkers' 2006. The well educated were less likely to separate in Austria, Lithuania and the USA. Higher separation rates among the well educated were found in France, Greece, Italy, Poland and Spain. The positive gradient is according to the authors associated with higher costs of separation and divorce, the negative gradient with less generous welfare provisions (contrary to the authors' hypothesis but consistent with the differential in economic strain experienced in countries with little state support for poorer families).

All of the studies referenced so far deal with the stability of all unions. According to our concept of the standard family life course, it is only the dissolution of parental unions that is the focus. Studies in Sweden (Hoem 1997) and the other in the United States (Raley & Bumpass 2003) have shown that education is also associated with lower disruption rates among parental unions.

The association between education and delayed parenthood is in large part a function of enrollment in higher education (e.g., Hank 2001; Kantorová 2003; Kravdal 2001; Santow & Bracher 2001). Of course, highly educated women and men have time to 'catch up' in childbearing after completing study, particularly when the less well educated are having only one or two children. But delay also opens up opportunities for meaningful alternatives to parenthood and increases earnings that might be lost. As a result, women with higher education are more likely to remain childless than those with lower education (Hoem, Neyer & Andersson 2006a; Kravdal 2001; Kreyenfeld 2004; Neyer & Hoem 2008; Statistiska centralbyrån 2002). Where public policy and private practices make it easier to reconcile work and family life, educated women have more resources with which to raise children and may be more likely to do so. Recent studies in the Nordic countries (Andersson et al. 2008; Kravdal & Rindfuss 2007; Lappegård 2000) and in the USA (Martin 2000) suggest that educational differentials in childlessness are on the decline due to increasing childlessness among less well educated women or increasing childlessness among the highest educated. A recent study by Kravdal and Rindfuss (2007) in Norway shows that the positive educational differential in fatherhood has increased over time as less well educated men have increasingly been childless.

Although the average number of children has usually been negatively associated with education, that gap may also be narrowing (Kravdal 1992; United Nations 2003). Several studies have found positive effects of education on the risk of a second or higher-order birth, among women with at least one child (Andersson, Duvander & Hank 2003; Hoem, Prskawetz & Neyer 2001; Hoem, Neyer & Andersson 2006b; Köppen 2006; Kravdal 2001; 2004; Oláh 2001; Statistiska centralbyrån 1996b) but the relationship often varies across cohorts and models. None of this research distinguishes higher-order births as occurring in the first birth union. In addition, any small advantages in conditional likelihood of second birth are not nearly as large as the differences by women's education in childlessness. Thus, women's education is, overall, associated with lower likelihood of having at least two children, while men's education produced a cumulative positive association.

Most studies of union status and births separate marital from non-marital, including cohabitation, and do so only for women. Studies in several wealthy countries find a negative association between enrollment or attainment and nonmarital childbearing (Brien, Lillard and Waite 1999; Bumpass and Lu 2000; Ermisch 2001; Upchurch, Lillard and Panis 2002). Comparative analyses by Kiernan (2001) and Kennedy (2004) have distinguished births to cohabiting couples from those to single women. Taken together, the studies showed that education was negatively associated with non-union childbearing in East Germany, France, the UK, Norway, Sweden and the US. In four of these countries (France, the UK, Sweden and the US), education was also negatively associated with having children while cohabiting rather than in marriage. In Austria, Italy, Spain, Switzerland and West Germany, education was only weakly associated or in some cases positively associated with non-marital births. No educational differences were found in cohabiting versus marital births, however.

Educational differences were not investigated by Wu & Li (2001) in their study of family trajectories of U.S. women. They did, however, distinguish race/ethnic groups having, on average, quite different levels of education. Compared to white non-Hispanic women born 1945-54, for example, African-American women were much less likely to have been married once, with children, and not separated by age 35 (15% versus 51%). Education is not all that distinguishes these groups, however. Hispanic women – who in that cohort had lower education than African-American women, had much higher likelihood of a ‘normative’ life course (48%). Excluding women who had only one child and remained married did not change the relative order of the three ethnic groups.

To sum up, it appears that the biggest educational ‘divide’ occurs at first birth – better educated women are less likely to have a first child, but more likely to have a first birth in a union. For men, the evidence on non-union births is sketchy and likely under-estimated because non-union births are under-reported. The gap in childlessness has been smaller for men and may be reversing as the least well educated men cannot find partners. Variable and small educational differences are found in continuation to a second birth, while parental separation favors the highly educated, both men and women. The opposing forces at first birth and after first union birth may produce a relatively equal distribution of the ideal family life course among women but should favor the ideal for better educated men.

Data and methods

In our analyses, we compare family life courses observed to age 40 across cohorts in France, Sweden and the United States. Sweden and the United States represent the extremes of different types of welfare regimes in terms of social and economic inequality and public support for the reconciliation of work and family demands. France has been classified as exemplifying a relatively ‘conservative’ welfare regime with moderate levels of economic inequality and work-family reconciliation but its family patterns have become increasingly close to those of the Nordic countries. The French data offer advantages, however, that outweigh the possibility that France should be viewed as an unrecognized Nordic sibling. We also present shifts in family life courses to age 40 for cohorts born from 1930 to the late 1950s and differences between women and men.

Data for France come from the French ‘Etude de l’Histoire Familiale’ (EHF) 1999, which was conducted together with the census in March 1999 (Cassan, Héran, Toulemon 2000). In this study, 235 000 women and 145 000 men completed an additional questionnaire on their origin, children, partnerships, working life, social origin and languages spoken in the family. We limit our analysis to native born women and men or immigrants who arrived in metropolitan France before they reached age 15, i.e. who experienced the transition to adulthood in France. We also excluded respondents who experienced a birth or union formation before age 15. We focus on birth cohorts from 1930-1968, i.e., those for whom we could observe family transitions through at least age 30. The analytic samples include about 150,000 women and 100,000 men. Respondents provided complete birth histories and reported start and ending dates for their first and most recent union.

For Sweden, we use two data sources in order to increase the sample size in some cohorts: 1) the 1991 and 2000 Level of Living Surveys (LNU); and 2) the 1992 Survey of Family and Work (the Swedish version of the European Fertility and Family Surveys, FFS). The LNU was first conducted in 1968, and repeated in 1974, 1981, 1991, and 2000. The original sample was a 1/1000 random sample of the Swedish population ages 15-75. Each subsequent wave aimed to create a new cross-section representative of the population at the time of the survey, while maintaining a longitudinal component. We are able to observe to age 40 LNU respondents born in 1959 or earlier. The FFS was based on simple random samples of women born in 1949, 1954, 1959, 1964, and 1969, and of men born in 1949, 1959, and 1964. We use cohorts born in 1959 or earlier, weighting to adjust for the over-sampling of single-year cohorts for 1949, 1954 and 1959. The FFS and the 1991 and 2000 LNU included complete birth and union histories for both women and men.

Family life courses in the United States are derived from the 1987-88 National Survey of Families and Households and the 1995 National Survey of Family Growth. The NSFH is based on a representative sample of 13,008 adults. We are able to observe cohorts born before 1946 to age 40. The 1995 NSFG is based on a nationally representative sample of 10,847 women ages 15-44 in 1995, meaning that we can observe the 1950-54 birth cohort to age 40. Both surveys include complete union and birth histories; in the NSFH, a random half of the main respondents are male. We are unable to use the more recent 2002 NSFG survey because an error in the interview schedule omitted questions about the end date of a previous union for a non-random set of women. Although men were surveyed for the first time in the 2002 NSFG, they were not asked to provide complete birth and union histories. Despite these limitations, the U.S. is an important comparative case, having been identified as relatively extreme among wealthy nations in terms of non-union childbearing and union dissolution.

We measure educational attainment according to international standards as ‘low’, ‘medium’ and ‘high’. In all countries, ‘high’ education is defined as the receipt of a university or four-year college degree. Those with ‘low’ education have no additional vocational or academic training after approximately age 18, i.e., after completing a short upper secondary course of study or, in the U.S., high school education. The fact that we must measure education at the end of the family life courses we observe is due to lack of comparable data on history of educational enrollment and attainment of certification. We recognize that some of the educational differentials we observe may arise from effects of early family events (or absence thereof) on educational attainment or enrollment. It is also possible, however, that unobserved plans for further education do influence choices along the family life course and that completed education is a good proxy for such plans.

Analyses

Our analyses produce what can be called ‘deep description’. We show educational differences in the percentage who ‘step off’ the pathway to a standard family life course at each of the critical junctures defined in Figure 1. We begin with the 1950-54 cohort of women, the youngest group we can observe to age 40 in all three countries. In France

and Sweden, we compare their experience to that of men. We then move to older cohorts, those born in the 1940s and 1930s, to investigate changes that have occurred in pathways to a standard family life course and shifts in educational differences. In all three countries, we can compare the experiences of women and men in these earlier cohorts.

Preliminary analyses demonstrate that the percentage of women and men remaining on the pathway to a standard family life course is about 50% across countries and cohorts. The critical junctures that are most important vary across cohorts, as we would expect from knowledge of trends in fertility and union stability. Although men's and women's experiences are roughly parallel, educational differentials are not. Educational differences are much more pronounced in the U.S. than in France or Sweden where small or no educational differences are found for women, somewhat larger differences for men.

Critical Pathways in the Family Life Course

