The Educational Gradient of Fertility Intentions in Europe: A Meta-Analysis

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Research Idea

Background:
In recent years, increasing shares of women have made large investments in education. Whether and to what extent these investments are in conflict with women’s childbearing intentions are issues that have important repercussions for fertility levels and population ageing.

Theory:
Highly educated women have stronger control of their behaviour, the effect of education on fertility intentions is expected to be positive.

Highly educated women have more resources for translating their emotional feelings into plans and for realizing their plans. Higher income increases the demand for children, and the possibility of outsourcing childcare.

Research Question:
Whether and to what extent are highly educated women able to anticipate the negative effects of their postponement and incorporate them into their lifetime fertility intentions?

Hypotheses:
H1 – A positive educational gradient, especially at the beginning of the reproductive career.
H2 – The sign and shape of the educational gradient varies across countries.
H3 – Labour market features explain cross-country differences in educational gradient.

Method:
Meta-Analysis
Quantitative comparison of results across studies, with the use of adjusted measures of comparability, so-called effect sizes.

1) Suitable research papers are collected according to the criteria of comparability of outcome variables (“to have (another) child in the future?”)
2) Coefficients of each study are recalculated to effect sizes

Analysis

Effect Sizes by Countries:

Effect Sizes by Gender and Parity:

Results

1) Overall pattern: The educational gradient of parity specific fertility intentions is slightly positive in Europe, especially at the early stages of reproductive career.

2) Gender and parity differences:
   a) At low parities (zero and one), the educational gradient is positive in almost all European countries for men while it is positive in all but Central and Eastern European countries for women.
   b) The gender differences tend to decrease at higher parities (one child and above)

3) Cross-country differences:
   a) The educational gradient is most positive in Italy and most negative in Norway with small educational gradient (light)/large educational gradient (dark)
   b) The country share of highly educated women in the labour force participation and the country level of gender equality reached in the labour force participation explain the differences.

Future Steps:

a) Multilevel Analysis: With the use of a Multilevel Analysis of several European Population Surveys (European Social Survey, Generations Gender Survey and Eurobarometer), country-specific effects can be untangled more effectively from individual determinants of fertility intentions.

b) Longitudinal Study: Following individuals and their changing fertility intentions over time, potential selection biases of groups with different educational background could be ruled out.

References: