Whose social mobility matters to fertility behavior: His, hers or neither at certain statuses?

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Abstract

Multiple mechanisms potentially link social mobility and fertility behavior. The relationship between mobility and childbearing has recently become a subject of investigation once again now that large-scale longitudinal micro data allows us to observe the relationship more carefully. One advantage of new resources is the possibility to observe not just the individual influence of a man's or woman's mobilty events on childbearing, but how these factors operate within a couple. Results of discrete time hazard analyses show that downward mobility has no influence on either second or third child conceptions for both men and women. Upward mobility, on the other hand is positively related to second conceptions for men. In contrast, both men and women have lower third birth risks when they have been upwardly mobile. The final analyses will show how these factors operate when viewed from a couple perspective.

Introduction

Scholars have developed a rich set of theories and mechanisms through which mobility plausibly influences family size. The original focus was on upward mobility and the relationship was expected to be inverse. Arsene Dumont (1849-1902) coined the term "social capillarity" to explain declining fertility by an increased desire for upward mobility and Westoff et al. (1961) elaborated the theory by claiming that status aspirations deter childbearing because they both require similar expenditures of energy, time and money. Empirical research on the hypothesis grew over the next decades (e.g., Berent 1952; Westoff et al. 1963; Blau and Duncan 1967; Hope 1971; Bean and Swicegood 1979; Stevens 1981; Sobel 1981; Kasarda and Billy 1985) in which scholars proposed many mechanisms and tested them in different contexts and with different methods. First, a *social disintegrative* effect was argued to arise when mobility disrupts family and social ties and creates a desire to compensate for the loss; alternatively, fertility may decline because of increased strain and stress. The second mechanism is *status enhancement*, by which families seek to maximize their resources—by limiting fertility—to obtain higher mobility, maintain their current status or avoid downward mobility. A third pathway is through a *relative economic effect* (Easterlin 1976) in which a downward turn in economic status will induce fertility avoidance and vice versa. The alternative hypothesis to all these mechanisms is that individuals make fertility decisions simply on the basis of the behavior associated with either their origin or destination class (Duncan 1966; Stevens 1981).

After three decades, literature that focused on trying to disentangle these mechanisms yielded surprisingly few consistent results, which Kasarda & Billy (1985) argued was due to unaccounted variation in the institutional settings, theoretical ambiguity as well as significant limitations in the methods and data at the time. The topic of this specific relationship subsequently receded from social stratification and demographic research. This project aims to contribute to a new debate using better equipped data and methods as well as expanding the theoretical discussion to include the important work from the last decades on gender, work and

family (e.g., Becker 1981; Oppenheimer 1988).

In prior mobility and fertility research, scholars analyzed the total number of children alongside the occupational class of adults and their parents at selected moments in childhood and adulthood. Although this strategy may have reflected data limitations, the timing of these measures reflected data availability rather than theoretically relevant moments in the life course, which meant researchers could not observe the order of events. Knowing when mobility and childbearing occurred is important because it ensures that the relationship estimates the impact of mobility on childbearing, rather than the impact of family size on mobility. This very important limitation of past research can be avoided in this study because the data provide information on the timing and order of childbearing and mobility events.

Another important innovation of this project is to include women as independent social actors. Prior fertility research mostly preceded women's high participation in the labor force and social status was therefore inferred from the husband's and father's occupations. The data used in this study allows both women and men to be observed and, therefore, this project will fill the gap in knowledge about how women's own mobility matters for childbearing decisions. In addition, how mobility influences childbearing within couples will also be assessed, which is a critical advancement because we know fertility decisions are influenced by both partners (Thomson 1997; Thomson & Hoem 1998) and, particularly, by both partners' labor market status (Matysiak & Vignoli 2008; Vignoli et al. 2012). While it is certainly worth knowing whether a woman's occupational trajectory is influential to her fertility, and most current data sources only provide the possibility for observing this independent effect, men's mobility might be even more influential. In addition, we may find protective elements of a mobility effect depending on certain levels of a partner's social status such as we would expect if the household plays a "smoothing" role in intragenerational mobility. How gender-specific, couple-specific and household-specific factors influence mobility's relationship to fertility is the main research aim in this study.

This study is situated in the context of Sweden and the policy and welfare context, along with the stratification system, may play an important role in how mobility is related to fertility. In Sweden, the long-term social and political emphasis on decreasing inequality and lessening social inheritance make this an interesting context for mobility research. In relation to family and fertility dynamics, women and men receive strong institutional support for being both earners and carers in Sweden. Long and generous parental leave is provided in Sweden for both mothers and fathers as well as very high quality publically provided childcare. These policies enable women to be as present in the labor market as men, even after entering parenthood. They also promote a dual-earner, dual-carer system. This has two distinct implications: 1) a tradeoff between career and family is less necessary than in contexts lacking this support, and 2) women and men face more similar work and family demands than in other contexts. For these reasons, we may see that the mobility and fertility relationship is less pronounced in Sweden than elsewhere and we may also see less gender difference in the relationship if the status enhancement mechanism is important. In more general terms, these policies have been argued to play a role in keeping fertility rates relatively high in Sweden, where women and men enter parenthood quite late but generally have two children.

Data

The data on which this analysis is based comes from administrative registers that are collected by Statistics Sweden: The Longitudinal Database for Health Insurance and Labor Market Studies and The Structure of Earnings Survey. This data is of very high quality and covers the entire population of Sweden. It contains some family background information as well as life course biographies, including detailed histories of working life and children born. Most histories are available from 1968-2007, but annual observation of occupations only begins in 1996. This provides 11 years in which we can observe all social mobility experiences and childbirths. Because occupations cannot be observed regularly before 1996, the data is left truncated. Therefore, the period during which an individual is at risk of a childbearing event must begin at a moment in time that is uniform across all individuals in the data; for this reason, I study second and third parity transitions and begin observing men's and women's occupational class status the year before they enter parenthood. The focus on higher order births is also necessary because the data do not allow us to link partners who are unmarried unless they share a common child. By having a first child together, we know a man and a woman who are assigned the same residence are in a partnership. This limits our possibilities of studying couples who have not had a child together yet.

Occupational information is gathered in the Fall of each year, which means the earliest first births we can observe take place in the summer of 1997. Our sample therefore is women and men who had their first child between June 1997 and 2007 and they are censored at the next conception, emigration, death or 2007. The sample contains only those who were born in Sweden. In total, there are 271,208 women and 220,952 men in the analysis of second conceptions and 153,226 women and 119,758 men in the analysis of third conception. A discrete hazard model is implemented to analyse the time-varying determinants of each conception.

The coverage of the occupation register is not complete. All individuals working in public institutions or firms with 400+ employees in Sweden are included, but firms with less than 400 employees are randomly sampled, which means this is an unbalanced panel dataset. When occupational data is missing, observations are retained in the sample and coded to indicate missing information. The occupational information available comes in the form of Swedish-specific occupational codes, which are translated into three digit ISCO88 codes and then categorized into the European Socioeconomic Classification. This classification is based on the EGP schema and is an improvement only in terms of its validation for comparative purposes. At heart, it differentiates positions in society in terms of employment relations, which involve how the work fits into systems of authority and control, economic security and prospects for advancement.

The schema consists of 7 classes, which corresponds to the original 9 class schema, but excluding two classes because the register does not provide occupational information for those who are self-employed or small employers.

ESeC Classes
1. High Professionals/managers
2. Low Professionals/managers
3. Intermediate
4. Low supervisor/technical
5. Low sales/services
6. Low technical
7. Routine

In this study, only intragenerational mobility is considered, and origin status is measured the year before the person enters parenthood or the first spell of employment after entering parenthood and the destination status is measured every consecutive year. When the origin status is higher than the destination status, the spells are coded as downward mobility; conversely, destination statuses that are higher than origin statuses are coded as upward mobility. When origin and destination statuses are the same, the spell is coded as no mobility. Men and women are at risk of being mobile only when they are in paid employment. This means that when respondents are unemployed, inactive or there is missing information they are not categorized for mobility.

In all models, the following variables are controlled for: years since first birth, urban/rural residence, marital status (married vs. unmarried), educational enrolment and attainment (low, medium and high), previous occupational class, and current occupational class.

Results

First we display descriptive information about the occurrence of social mobility in our sample. Figure 1 shows the share of those who had a first child in summer of 1997 or later that experienced intragenerational mobility some time between entering parenthood and the conception of the second child (or they were censored). In this sample and time frame, downward mobility was quite rare: only one per cent of women and three per cent of men had this experience. In contrast, ten per cent of women and 13 per cent of men experienced upward mobility in this period of observation.

Figure 2 displays the occurrence of mobility in a longer time frame: from the occupation at first birth until the third birth conception. (In the regression analyses, the window of observation is from the second birth until the third conception, but mobility before the second birth is observed and indicated in the model.) Somewhat more downward mobility occurred in this longer time frame: 4% women and 5% men. We also see double the share of women (20%) achieving upward mobility compared to before the second birth, but hardly any increase for men. The bulk of upward mobility for men apparently happens before they have their second child.

Figure 1. Descriptive evidence of mobility events between the first birth and second conception

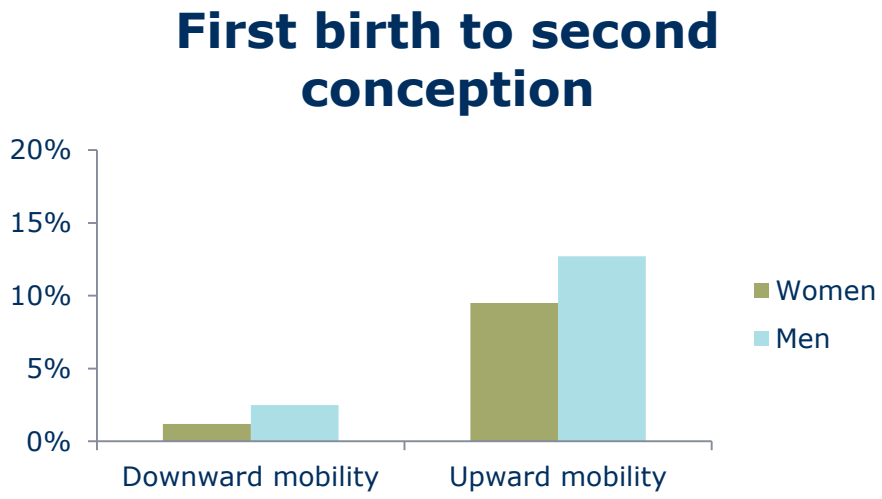
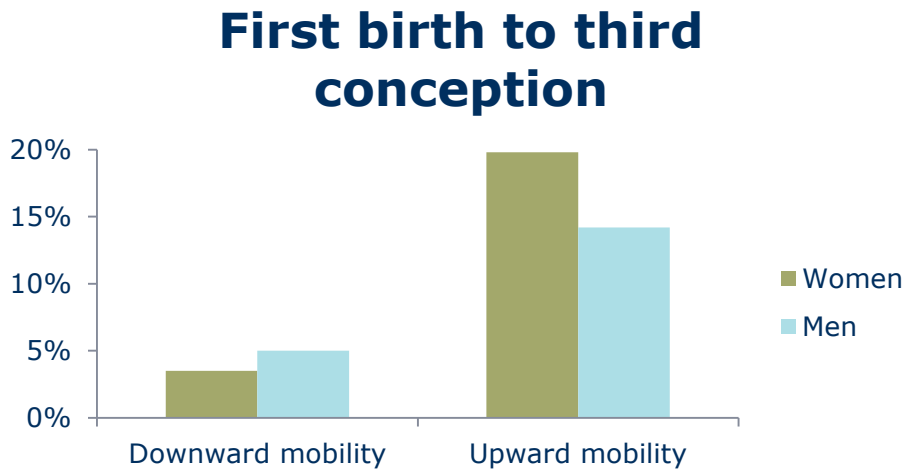


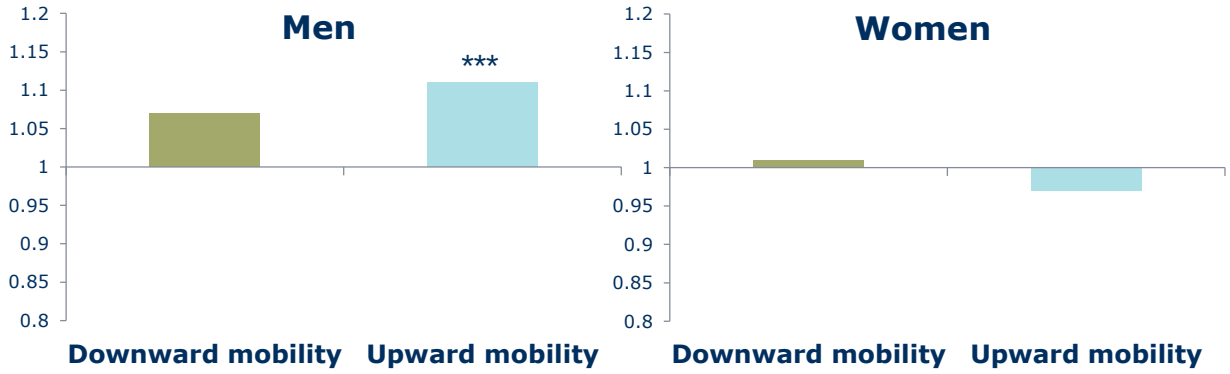
Figure 2. Descriptive evidence of mobility events between the first birth and third conception



The next figures show results from the discrete hazard models of second and third conceptions. The relationship between downward mobility and second conception is straightforward: For neither men nor women do we see any affect of downward mobility, which was a relatively rare event. For women, we also do not see any relationship between upward mobility and second conceptions. However, men who were upwardly mobile appear to transition to a second conception sooner or more often than men who were not mobile.

A different story emerges for third conceptions. Both men and women had lower third birth hazards when they had been upwardly mobile. Women had a 14% lower risk and men had an 8% lower risk. Downward mobility was still not related to third births in any way.

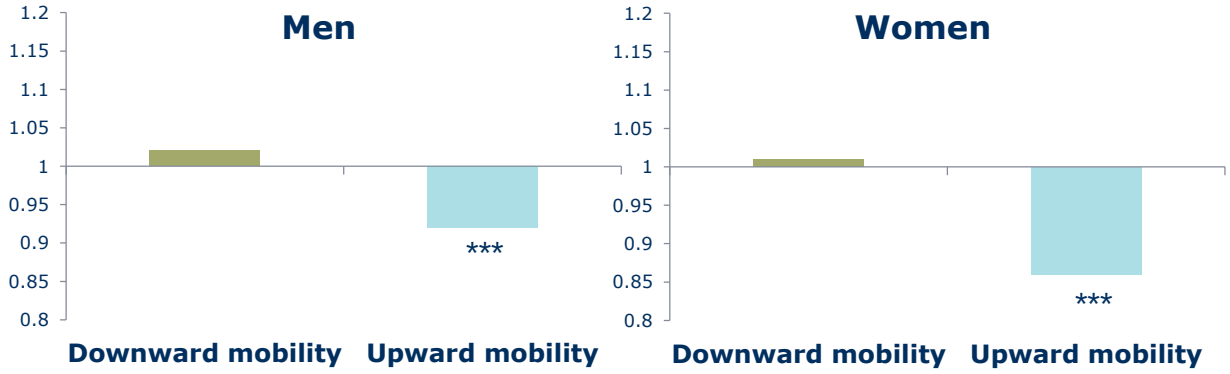
Figure 3. Second conception relative risks related to social mobility



*** = p<0.000

Control variables: years since first birth, urban/rural residence, marital status, educational enrolment and attainment, previous occupational class, current occupational class

Figure 4. Third conception relative risks related to social mobility



*** = p<0.000

Control variables: years since second birth, urban/rural residence, marital status, educational enrolment and attainment, previous occupational class, current occupational class

Results related to partner's mobility to be estimated soon.

Conclusions

To conclude, we found that mobility is hardly related to second parity transition. This may not be surprising in light of the fact that having two children remains very common in Sweden. But we did find that men who have achieved upward mobility since entering parenthood are even more likely to have a second child or have it sooner. This finding can be interpreted in terms of the relative economic effect, where the rewards of upward mobility encourage childbearing because resources are relatively abundant. We expected this mechanism to be strongest when the main breadwinner in the household experiences mobility, which would generally be men.

Gender differences might also have applied to the status enhancement mechanism, which seems a likely explanation for the relationship between upward mobility and third births. We would expect men's career and family orientations to be less in conflict than women's. But we find that both men and women are less likely to have a third child when they have been upwardly mobile. This is an interesting finding that may be unique to a context where men and women both play earner and carer roles, which is something to explore in further comparative research. Comparisons across time and space are essential for building a comprehensive body of knowledge about how social mobility and fertility behavior are related.

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