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How do educational and occupational resources relate to the timing of family formation? A couple analysis of the Netherlands

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Abstract

Background: Fertility research often uses data from women only. This can bias the results if the effects of education and occupation on fertility are dependent upon the characteristics of the male partner. Using retrospective life-course information from both partners, this study examines the effects of educational and occupational characteristics on the transition to a first childbirth.

Objective: The objective is to examine how the respective earning potential and career dynamics of the male and the female partners in couples influenced the timing of their entry into parenthood from 1960 to 2009 in the Netherlands, as well as the extent to which the characteristics of the two partners were interdependent in terms of their influence on the transition to a first birth.

Methods: Using couple-period data from four pooled cross-sectional waves (1998-2009) of the Family Survey of the Dutch Population, discrete time event history models accounting for unobserved heterogeneity at the couple level are estimated to predict the birth of the first child, starting from the moment couples started living together.

Results: The results show that a high earning potential of the female partner (based on her educational attainment, the status of her first job, and whether she is in full-time work or has supervisory responsibilities) has delaying effects on her transition to a first childbirth. With regard to the male partner, the only significant predictors of the entry into parenthood are educational attainment and working hours, and there is no evidence of an interdependence of the partners. The comparison of effects over time indicates that the female partner's higher earning potential has become a stronger predictor of delayed parenthood over time, while a positive effect for the male partner's higher earning potential is seen only up to 1990.

Conclusions: The results suggest that the educational and occupational characteristics and the labor market participation of the female partner are stronger determinants of first-birth timing than the characteristics of the male partner.

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