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Articles

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Effects of current education on second- and third-birth rates among Norwegian women and men born in 1964: Substantive interpretations and methodological issues

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Abstract

A variety of approaches have been employed to assess the importance of women's education for their second- or third-birth rates. Some researchers have included the educational level measured at a relatively high age in their models, whereas others have included current education. A few have taken selection into account by modelling first-, second-, and higher-order birth rates jointly, with a common unobserved factor. The corresponding education-fertility relationships among men, however, has not attracted any attention. In this study, based on Norwegian register data for the 1964 cohort, a high current educational level for a woman is found to stimulate her second- and third-birth rates. Controlling for selection through joint modelling turns out to be quite unimportant, but the results are very different if the educational level attained by age 39 is included instead of current education. It is important to be aware of such sensitivity to the specification of education. The corresponding effects for men are also positive, but not more strongly positive than those for women. These results may suggest that we should not take for granted that women's education generally reduces fertility, and that it does so because of higher opportunity costs for the better educated. However, it is also possible that a high current educational level is linked with modest aspirations for further schooling, which would tend to stimulate subsequent fertility, that it is partly caused by some individual, family or community characteristics that also lead to high fertility, or that it even to some extent is a result of plans to have a child fairly soon. These alternative interpretations are discussed.

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