

Education, union pathways and childlessness

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The study background

Previous research suggests a) a negative educational gradient in men's ultimate childlessness and, in also recent Nordic female cohorts, a negative gradient is observed. b) that childlessness is strongly linked to partnership histories (neverpartnering or cohabitation instability), and c) that the association between men's education and entry into parenthood operates chiefly via union status. Our objective is to put more pieces of puzzle together.

Objectives and/or research question(s)

This study examines linkages among education, partnerships, childlessness and gender. We ask to what extent the association between education and childlessness is mediated by union pathway, and whether the significance of education and union pathway for childlessness interact.

Data and methods

We analyse register data on Finnish men and women born 1969 and 1970 (11% sample, N=12,951). We take a holistic approach to union trajectories that consist of states entered via the formation and dissolution of cohabitations and marriages. With sequence and cluster analysis, we identify typical union pathways (at ages 18–39), and in linear probability models link them to childlessness at age 42.

Results

Childlessness is strongly and negatively associated with education among men; among women the association is weaker. The union trajectories divide into four typical union pathways. Union pathways are associated with education, e.g., 'stable marriage' pathway is by far most common among the highly educated, and 'cohabitation instability' pathway more common among low educated, and 'neverpartnering or late cohabitation' among low educated men. The union pathways are very strongly linked to ultimate childlessness, with percentages childless at age 42 varying from 6.6% ('stable married' pathway) to 75.5% ('neverpartnering or late cohabitation'). The strong negative association between low education and childlessness among men is almost completely mediated by union pathway: when union pathway is controlled for, educational differences in childlessness are negligible. Within union pathway groups of men, educational differences in childlessness are small, and in stable partnered (married or cohabiting) pathways nonexistent. Among women, cohabiting pathways are less strongly associated with childlessness than among highly educated women.

Main conclusions

The findings suggest that partnership histories are a key mechanism linking men's low education and ultimate childlessness. Among women, the associations are similar but weaker.