

What comes first? An investigation of the relationship between low education and early parenthood in Germany

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Having a child reduces the household income (Schulze, 2010). In particular, young couples face this challenge because they are in a very sensitive stage of their life in which the course for the later standard of living is set (Stutzer, 2002). Although many couples in Germany postpone the birth of the first child until the completion of education and the establishment in the working market (Schmitt & Winkelmann, 2005), it is of interest to focus on those who mother or father their first child at an comparable early stage of their lives, because an early transition into parenthood is often accompanied with serious socioeconomic disadvantages. As low education leads to a low present and future income and endangers later wealth, I want to focus on education as one important determinant of socioeconomic inequality.

There is a variety of research looking at the association between early parenthood and low education. Cornelißen and Bien (2015) observe for Germany that with a lower degree of education an early parenthood is more likely. Helfferich and Kandt (1996) come to the same conclusion, that in Germany a lower education is associated with an early first child. Hango and Le Bourdais (2009) find for Canada that the breakup of a school career raises the risk of an early parenthood. In Germany early transitions to parenthood seem to be mostly the result of unplanned pregnancies (Helfferich & Kandt, 1996). Young pregnant women who are lower educated tend to abort an unplanned pregnancies less often than women with a higher education (Helfferich & Kandt, 1996) and women with a lower education have

a higher risk of an unplanned child because they show more often an inconsistent contraceptive behavior (Helfferich, Klindworth, Heine, Wlosnewski, & Eckert, 2013). Although this association of low education and early parenthood is well-known, it is very difficult to reveal the mechanisms lying behind it. We do not know for certain whether low education leads to early parenthood or whether this association is vice versa. On the one hand, low education might explain early parenthood. This means that low education leads in some way to an early pregnancy and to the decision to keep the child. On the other hand, the challenges young parents face by an early transition to parenthood could possibly lead – for example, through a lack of time or energy – to lower education.

Arai (2003) delivers evidence for the first assumed mechanism. She assesses teenager-pregnancies as a result of low expectations in the lives of young women. For these young women the – mostly unplanned – pregnancy and birth of a child appears as a possible mean to escape a disadvantaged life situation. Higgins, Hirsch and Trussel (2008) give a similar explanation concerning inconsistent contraceptive behavior. They observed that socially disadvantaged young women also might see the possibility of an unintended pregnancy as a way to improve a negative life situation. The finding of Kurz (2005), that especially women with a low or no further education are using a period of unemployment to realize parenthood, is in accordance to that assumption. Friedman, Hechter and Kanazawa (1994) deliver a theoretical explanation for this sometimes counter-intuitive behavior. They argue that in a situation characterized by uncertainty, a child and the role of a parent can be seen as a way to reduce uncertainty, although such a decision for a child in an adverse life-situation might not be the optimal decision.

On the other hand, Cornelißen and Bien (2015) suppose – in accordance to the second assumed mechanism – that disadvantages of young German parents concerning education are the result of the impossibility to complete education. Dariotis et al. (2011) observing early fatherhood come – with reference to Arnett (2000) – to a similar conclusion, that early parenthood interrupts a process which is very important for the economic success in later life. This is in accordance to Birg's (1992) argumentation. He argues that an early decision for a child might be risky, because fertility decisions are normally irreversible and reduce the competitive potential in the educational and occupational biography. Especially young people suffer here a high risk if such a decision is made early in the life-course.

In my paper, I want to answer the question which of these two mechanisms is more responsible for the association between education and early parenthood. Is low education rather a result or the cause of early parenthood? I will use data from the German Family Panel (pairfam) launched in 2008 as a nationwide random sample of more than 12,000 persons of three birth cohorts (born 1971-73; 1981-83 and 1991-93) (Huinink et al., 2011), release 6.0 (Brüderl et al., 2015). Since I want to investigate the influence of early parenthood on education I will focus on the persons of the first cohort who were born between 1991 and 1993 and thus were between 15 and 17 years old at the time of the first interview. I try to gain insight by analyzing the education and employment sequences around the time of the conception and the birth of a first child.

Preliminary results show that low education seems to be rather the result than the cause of early parenthood for women. A majority of those women of the first cohort, who were in training at the time of the conception, did interrupt or break up their training without a degree. Since most of their pregnancies were unplanned, this might be an indicator for an unwanted interruption of education.

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