

Changing partner markets – changing pathways to parenthood?

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The expansion of higher education, which has been more pronounced for women than men, led to profound changes in the educational composition of couples. In particular, there has been a decline in the proportion of women partnered with more educated men, while unions in which women partner 'down' in education have become more prevalent. However, the implications of these shifts in 'who is in a union with whom' for women's and men's fertility outcomes remain largely unexplored. Although previous research has investigated parenthood transitions from a couple perspective, a key limitation of these studies is their analytical restriction to partnered individuals. Analysing only those who have a partner may lead to selection bias when drawing conclusions about women's and men's fertility. In this paper, we therefore analyse (a) the extent to which the link between women's and men's education and fertility is mediated through partner search outcomes, and (b) how this mediating role of partner search outcomes has changed across cohorts. Using data from the German Socioeconomic Panel (SOEP), we apply marginal structural models to approximate the total causal effect of women's and men's education on first and higher-order birth rates, and the natural indirect effect that mediates the total effect through the outcomes of the partner search process. Preliminary findings indicate a positive educational gradient in men's first birth rates and a negative gradient for women, which is partly explained by selection into unions. Our findings will contribute to the growing body of research on fertility from a dyadic perspective. Furthermore, we advance this research by studying cross-cohort changes and conceptualising partner search outcomes as a mediator, rather than solely focusing on partnered individuals.