Finding the right partner to have children after a separation, contrast between men and women

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Summary

In France, like in most industrialized countries, the last decades have seen dramatic changes in family behaviours. Notably, there has been a substantial increase in the proportion of couples separating: less than 15% of those first in union at the end of the 1970s separated by 10 years compared with around 30% of those first in union at the beginning of the 1990s. Childbearing trajectories are also more diverse: births occur today more often than before within a second or later union rather than within a relationship that is the first and only ever experienced one. Mean age at separation from first union is 31 in the recent years, and so the prospect of childbearing in subsequent unions may be correspondingly limited. The present paper is based primarily on retrospective data, from the French Generation and Gender Survey (2005) and addresses the fertility behaviour of men and women fertility in second or later unions. It focuses on how own age and previous live births, together with partner's characteristics, are associated with childbearing. First, male fertility is not limited by age in the same way as female, what might partly be due to the age difference between the partners. In second and later unions formed by men as well as by women, the age of the woman in the new couple is especially strongly associated with its fertility. Second, once the age of both partners in the couple is controlled for, childbearing risk appears to be reduced by children born before the relationship only when both partners already have some. This result doesn't vary whether the union was formed by a man and or a woman.

Extended abstract

Introduction

In France, new forms of partnering have emerged since the 1970s. The proportion of unmarried couples has significantly risen, in parallel with a process of "individualization" of couple and family life (Singly, 2007). Although marriages are still common, cohabitation without marriage is more and more widespread (Prioux,

2007). France also has a high total divorce rate (with unchanged divorce behaviours, 45 % of marriages starting in 2004 would end in divorce), and an even higher number of separation among cohabiting couples (25 % of first unions started in 1995-1999 are broken during the 5 first years). The family formation process can be affected by the union breakdown, and a growing number of people are experiencing a breakdown while they might have wanted (further) children. Recent literature highlights the consequences for completed fertility (Jansen *et al.*, 2008; Thomson *et al.*, 2009) as well as childbearing processes after the separation for women (Jefferies *et al.*, 2000).

Our purpose is to analyse how the reconstruction of a partnership, and the underlying choices, affect the subsequent childbearing behaviour in France. We especially investigate gender differences and the influence of age at repartnering. Couples formed at later ages are less likely to be fecund, which is strongly related to the woman's age (Leridon, 2002). Which part do age at new union formation and previous children of the partners play on the births within the new relationship?

Data and method

Using classical demographic methods in parallel with regressions and event history analysis, we study childbearing for people who experience a separation and repartner. The study is based on retrospective fertility and partnership history data, from the French Generation and Gender Survey (2005). Carried out on more than 10,000 men and women, the survey contains data on individuals' trajectories and their characteristics. All unions and births dates are asked to the respondent, a union being a cohabitation, a marriage, or a cohabitation transformed into a marriage, that lasted at least three months. Individuals selected for this study include persons who separated, thus excepting people whose partner died. The sub-sample for studying fertility is based on the one who repartner only. In a first investigation of the proportions of births by age and sex, we focus on the impact of the respective age of each partner. Using regressions and piecewise linear models based on the socio-demographic characteristics of the individuals, we then establish how age and previous children of both partners have an effect on childbearing risk within the new partnership. We also detail the influence of factors such as status of the previous union, education level…

Results

The probability of having a child during the five years of the second relationship decreases sharply with age for both men and women, but more strongly for women (figure 1, plain curves). Representing probability of childbearing in the respondent's couple by age of the partner instead of the respondent, we see that second unions' fertility is deeply restricted by the age of the woman (figure 1, dashed curves). From graphs not shown here, we show that the age difference of men with their partner at repartnering is often high, and that most of them repartner with a woman aged less than 35. In that condition, they are not as constrained as women for childbearing by the high sterility probability, and can continue having children later than women who repartner at the same age: in study of late fertility, the age difference between the partners (and especially the age of the woman) highly matters to understand the fertility process.

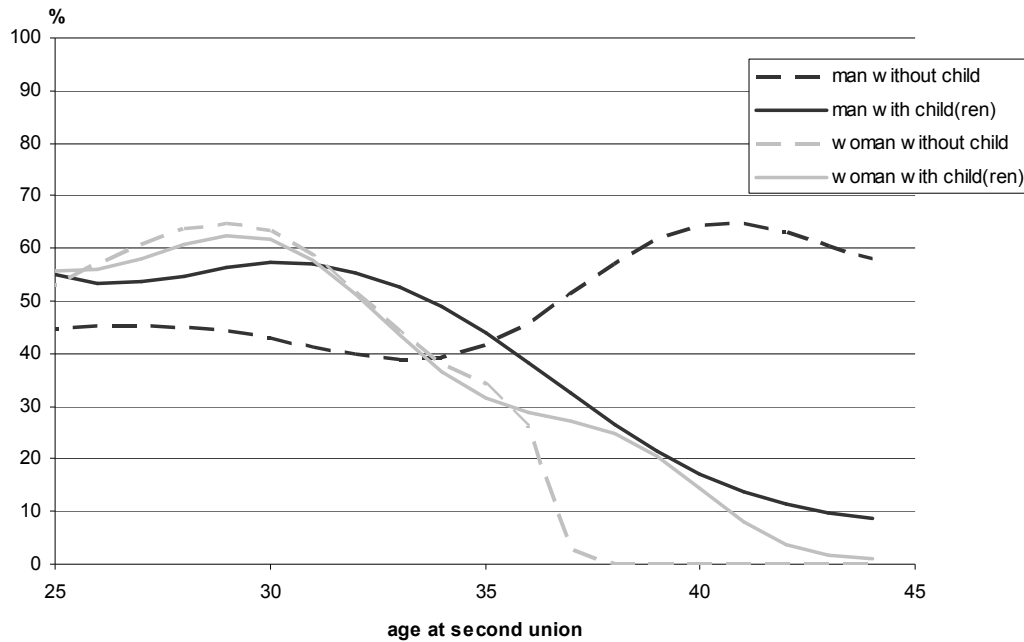**Figure 1**: Proportion of men and women who have a child within the five first years after repartnering
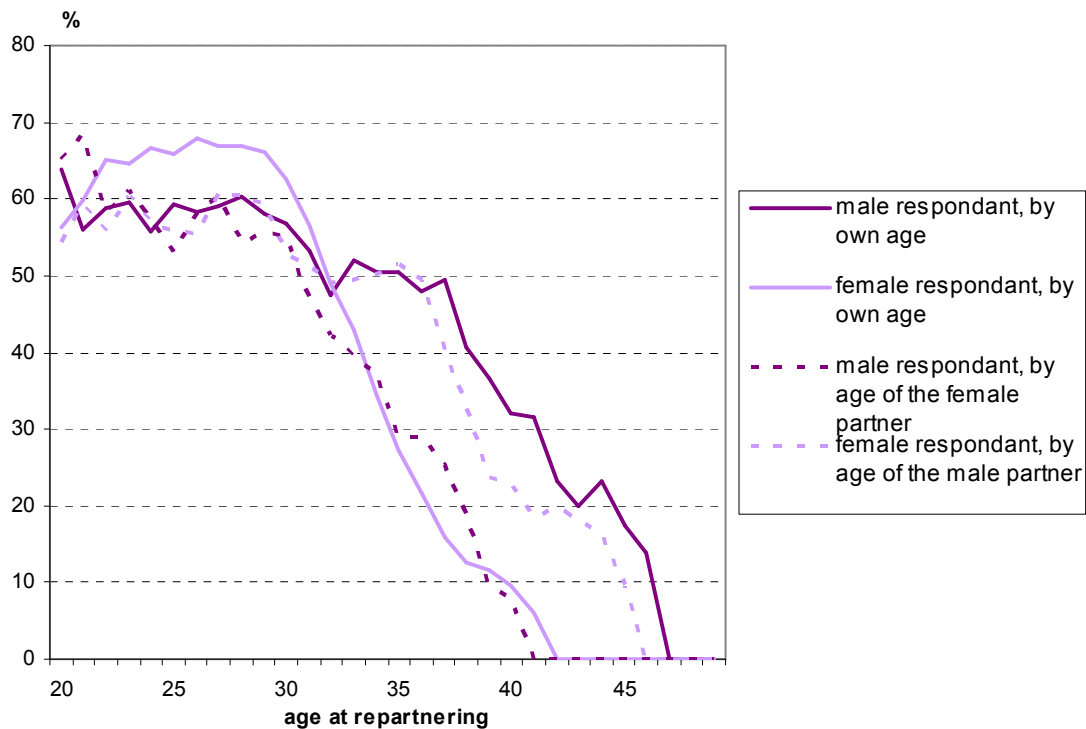
Field: men and women who repartnered between age 20 and 49 and between 1980 and 1999
Source: Ined-Insee, Erfi-GGS1, 2005

From Figure 2, women childbearing risk by age in the five first years of a second relationship doesn't differ depending on whether they already have children from a previous union or not, all other things being equal. Thus, once women have reentered a relationship, at equal age their estimated probability of having at least one further child doesn't seem to depend on previous children. However, men risks do seem to depend on their children by age. Young men without children are the less likely to have a child within five years than men who already have some and than women, which can correspond to less determination or interest for having children at least quickly. This effect reverses after age 35, and fathers see their childbearing risk fall down quickly, while childless men have children until late ages in their new union. The number of children ever had is controlled for, but doesn't change these results. The differences between the sexes observed before controls[1] remain but are partially erased by the control for the age of the woman, thus suggesting that the age of the woman is of high importance to explain childbearing differences between couples formed by men and women at later ages.

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[1] We don't show all the graphics here, but the same without control for age of the woman is very similar but with more distance between male and female curves at later ages.

Figure 2: Estimated probability of having children in the second union for men and women (especially: control for previous children and age of the woman)

Other controls: year of second union formation, duration between the unions, marital status in first union, education level, country of birth, religious practice
Field: men and women who repartnered between age 20 and 49 and between 1980 and 1999
Source: Ined-Insee, Erfi-GGS1, 2005

We now show the influence of combined children from both partners on childbearing within the five first years of union, still controlling for the age of the woman. Two contrasted age behaviours emerge from the graphical representations, which we use to decompose the study here: before and after age 32 for women, and before and after age 35 for men. For women, no significant change in the risk is induced by children before age 32; childbearing risk is significantly reduced after age 32 only when both them and their partner do have children. For men however, the differences already seen in the graph hold – i.e. young men without child are less likely to have children, and children from both partners reduce fertility mainly before age 35.

On the whole, for both sexes the risk of having children is significantly reduced only when both partners have children[2]. However, this is the case when we do take into account the age of both partners in our models. Otherwise the age of the woman and having previous children being highly correlated, childbearing risks depend of course of the previous children (Table not shown here).

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[2] These results have been tested with a duration model as well and are very stable depending on the model.

Table 1: Logistic regression of childbearing in the five first years of the second relationship for men and women (log-odds, standard error)

before pivot age	men		women	
no child	-0.836**	(0.41)	-0.448	(0.47)
child from ego	*ref*		*ref*	
child from the parner	-0.784	(0.59)	-0.387	(0.61)
child from both	-0.972*	(0.58)	-0.116	(0.51)
after pivot age	men		women	
no child	1.829**	(0.76)	-0.671	(0.69)
child from ego	*ref*		*ref*	
child from the parner	1.305	(0.81)	-0.816	(0.73)
child from both	-0.95	(0.71)	-0.963*	(0.51)

Pivot age = 32 for women and 35 for men

Field: men and women who repartnered between age 20 and 49 and between 1980 and 1999

Source: Ined-Insee, Erfi-GGS1, 2005

Conclusion

In France, large differences appear between men and women after a separation, and childbearing is a good example of the difference in limitations on men and women for forming a new family. The probability of having children decreases greatly from age 32 especially for women. The age difference between the partners explains most of the difference in the fertility of men and women, as well as whether both partners have children. However, men often have a younger partner, the women of their age thus being disadvantaged. Moreover, mothers who repartner choose a parent more often than fathers who repartner, which can explain another difference in childbearing expectations of men and women in a second relationship.

We note what can certainly be a selection effect: mothers are as likely as childless women to have children within five years at most ages, and only the presence of children from both partners significantly reduces the childbearing risk, even in the long term. Previous studies have highlighted that women with children are particularly disadvantaged in the repartnering process (Andersson, 2003; Beaujouan, 2009). Being women with low repartnering risks, the mothers who do eventually repartner might thus be the more willing to have children again. Other selection processes might also take place, which makes us consider comparison between men and women carefully.

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