

The convergence of fertility between ethnic groups in the UK: the role of the immigrant and UK-born generations

Sylvie Dubuc

Post-war migration has largely contributed to the ethnic plurality of the UK today and a number of studies have shown large differences in the level of fertility estimated by main ethnic groups in the recent past (e.g. Coleman and Smith, 2005; Large and Gosh, 2006; Rees, 2008). However, over 1987-2006, an overall convergence in fertility of the various ethnic groups (using the detailed 2001 census ethnic definition) has been measured (Dubuc, 2009; Dubuc and Haskey, in press). Despite this general trend, the pace of fertility convergence differs between various ethnic groups, a divergent trend has been observed for the Chinese group, and lastly, the level and timing of childbearing between groups remain distinct in recent years (Dubuc, 2009, Dubuc and Haskey, 2010).

Derived from the socialisation hypothesis (Goldstein and Goldstein, 1983; Kahn, 1988), the assimilation hypothesis assumes that immigrants are influenced by fertility norms and behaviour in their country of origin. After migration, a process of fertility convergence with the destination country should occur from generation to generation towards the local norm (e.g. the UK average and therefore the large majority White British). The socialization/assimilation theory, with respect to fertility of immigrants implies that the level of fertility follows a function that depends on the proportion of UK-born women within the total number of women of fertility age of a particular ethnic group. Departure from this model would suggest persistence of structural (socio-economic) and/or normative (socio-cultural) inherited differences between ethnic groups. This hypothetical scenario is tested, by estimating and analyzing the fertility levels and age patterns of UK-born and immigrant (foreign-born) women of the various ethnic groups in the UK over the past 20 years. The method used here to retro-construct birth by age of the mother (Dubuc, 2009) is thought to provide a valuable solution to minimize the increasingly documented risk of overestimation of the level of fertility measured by period TFRs (e.g. Toulemon, 1994; Sobotka 2008; Sobotka and Lutz, 2009).

The existing theoretical framework (e.g. selectivity and disruption effects, linear and segmented assimilation theory, minority status hypothesis) to explain fertility of the immigrant populations is used to discuss the findings. Overall results clearly suggest that the pace of convergence between ethnic groups is largely driven by the increasing proportion of the UK-born generations of women whose fertility is closer to the UK average and the major ethnic group (White British). However striking differences between ethnic groups deviate from the expectations of the assimilation theory and suggest an important role of socio-economic factors in shaping fertility.

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