Shaping the Life Course: The interaction between partnerships, family building and employment among migrants and their descendants in the UK

Sarah Christison, Júlia Mikolai & Hill Kulu
University of St Andrews

Abstract

This study examines the interaction between the three life domains of partnerships, family building, and employment among migrants and their descendants in the UK. The UK has a long history of migration resulting in a diverse mix of migrants and their descendants from a range cultural backgrounds. While previous studies have sought to examine the life course trajectories of migrant groups, these tend to focus on a single life domain. In this study, we bring together the three interconnected domains of union formation, fertility, and employment comparing differences in trajectories between natives, migrants, and their descendants Using data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study, we use multilevel, multistate and multi-process event history models to explore life course trajectories of UK natives, immigrants, and their descendants in the domains of fertility, partnership and employment. We model men and women separately to explore gender differences in how these trajectories are interrelated among immigrants and their descendants from different countries. We expect that some migrant groups such as those from South Asia will exhibit more conservative partnership and fertility trajectories compared to natives and European/Western migrants, and that these differences will persist for 2G individuals to some extent. We also anticipate that our analysis will reveal differences in the labour market participation between natives and migrants, particularly for women with children from Pakistani and Bangladeshi backgrounds. When examining trajectories by gender, we also expect that these three life domains be more closely related among women than men, especially for some groups.

Introduction

Many studies have examined the demographic processes of family formation, partnership, and employment. However, little attention has been paid to how these processes interact and influence one another. While often considered three distinct life course domains, partnership formations and dissolutions, childbearing, and engagement with the labour market are intrinsically linked. For example, previous studies have demonstrated that partnership status can influence the likelihood of having a child (Steele, et al., 2005), while parenthood status has also been found to influence union formation, either by precipitating the transition from cohabitation to marriage (Perelli-Harris, et al., 2012) or when re-partnering following union dissolution (Vanassche, et al., 2015). When considering the relationship between employment and childbearing, previous research has also found that there is a close link between engagement in the labour market and fertility. As with the relationship between fertility and union formation, employment and parenthood status have the potential to influence one another. Findings by (Joshi, 1998) suggest that higher-earner women may feel there are opportunity costs associated with having children, such as a loss of wages or delay in career progression, while for women in precarious employment, childbearing may be postponed until financial stability can be achieved (Steele, et al., 2014). Conversely, becoming a parent has also been found to change women's relationship with the labour market, either by triggering a move out of employment or through moving to self or part-time employment. Previous research by Harkness, et al. (2019) suggests that previous employment status was most predictive of whether mothers will return to employment, while the the likelihood of re-entering full time employment reduces with each additional birth. Finally, changes in partnership status have also been found to influence labour market transitions, particularly for women with children. Bonnet, et al. (2010) show that following the dissolution of a relationship, there were high instances of women returning to employment, especially for mothers in the Franch context.

Based upon these previous studies, it is therefore reasonable to hypothesise that the three domains of fertility, partnership and employment may be interconnected, with further research required to explore how these elements of an individuals' life course interact with one another. As life course trajectories are becoming more de-standardised and complex, the examination of the way in which individuals choose to shape their life course is becoming increasingly important (Kooiman, 2020; Elzinga & Liefbroer, 2007). This shift from a more traditional ordering of life course events may be understood in the context of the Second Demographic Transition (SDT) which posits that the post-war cultural shifts observed since the 1960s would result in a long-term decline in fertility levels and the expansion of pre-marital cohabitation (Lesthaeghe, 2020). Following this societal shift, the number of life course domains expanded, with less conservative lifestyles becoming more socially acceptable. With more life course trajectories available, it becomes more important to understand the complexities of life course transitions.

Despite evidence of growing life course complexity and de-standardisation, this has not occurred evenly across populations. In this study, we focus on how life course transitions across the domains of fertility, partnership and employment may vary between migrant groups and natives in the UK. The UK a has long history of migration and a diverse mix of migrant populations from across Europe, South Asia, Africa and the Caribbean. This makes the

UK an interesting context for exploring the life course trajectories of different migrant groups and their descendants.

When comparing the migrant population to natives, it may be hypothesised that migrants from the same country of origin may be more similar to one another compared to natives. Previous studies suggest that migrants from countries which are culturally dissimilar from the host country tend to follow a more conservative life course trajectory in terms of partnership formation and childbearing, with higher rates of fertility but low rates of childbearing outside of marriage (Kulu, et al., 2017). These migrants may also face greater challenges to enter the labour market such as language barriers or difficulties in getting qualifications recognised (Dustmann, et al., 2003; Rendall, et al., 2010). Taking into account the role of socialisation in shaping the life course and behaviour, we may also expect variation between migrant groups based on their specific cultural norms acquired through socialisation.

While socialisation may mean that migrants may differ from the native population, as well as from migrants from different backgrounds, the assimilation theory would lead us to expect that their children (second generation) may exhibit life course trajectories and patterns which more closely resemble those of the native population than their first-generation parents (Wilson, 2020). Despite socialisation within the host country, there is some debate regarding how upbringing and exposure may shape future life course trajectories. For example, the minority subculture hypothesis argues that as second-generation individuals are raised by migrant parents, they may exhibit behaviour more similar to that of their family (Kulu, et al., 2019). This may be more pronounced among some groups of migrants who live in communities of migrants who share similar cultural backgrounds. Potential differences between second-generation and the native population may also be explained by the minority-group status hypothesis which suggests that possible discrimination faced by second generation individuals may influence their social relationships and in turn their fertility and partnership trajectories (Poston, et al., 2006).

While there have been a number of studies which have explored the partnership, fertility, or employment trajectories of migrants and their descendants, few have brought together these three domains in a single study. We aim to build on the existing literature by exploring the interactions between these three life course domains and by comparing migrant groups both to one another based on their country of origin, as well as to their descendants, and UK natives.

Data and Methods

This study uses data from the UK Household Longitudinal Study (UKHLS) waves 1-12, spanning from 2009-2021. It is a large and nationally representative dataset which collects data from around 30,000 households including two boost samples which increase the number of sample members from ethnic minority groups, providing valuable data on migrants and their descendants from a range of backgrounds (University of Essex, 2023). The survey also collects data on a range of subjects related to family building, partnership formation and employment, including retrospective data from age 16, as well as recording

events which occur between waves. We follow individuals from age 16 until age 50, the final date of interview or death. We compare natives who were born in the UK to two UK born parents to three migrant groups: 1G migrants who were born outside the UK and migrated to the UK after the age of 15, 1.5G migrants who were born outside the UK and migrated to the UK aged 15 or younger, and 2G individuals who were born in the UK to at least one foreign-born parent. We compare immigrants and their descendants from five different origin groups: Europe and the West, India, Pakistan & Bangladesh, the Caribbean, and African countries.

We will use competing-risks multilevel multistate event history models to investigate the three domains simultaneously (Putter et al. 2007). Individuals face the risks of starting employment, forming a first union and having a first child. If they become employed first, then they face another set of competing transitions: moving to another employment opportunity (for the sake of simplicity, we only include transitions between employed statuses in this example), forming a first union and having a first child. Modelling each transition in the three-dimensional space separately would be inefficient (i.e. would lead to small sample sizes) and unnecessary. We can simplify the model by analysing all competing transitions (i.e. independent of whether they are first, second or higher-order events) and by including relevant covariates for higher-order transitions (e.g. second and third employment). The proposed analysis will provide a detailed picture of the evolution of the life trajectories of immigrants and their descendants, with and without controlling for various individual-level factors). We will extend the multilevel event history analyses to also detect and control for potential unobserved co-determinants of all three trajectories (e.g., cultural preferences).

Expected Results

As we are currently conducting this analysis, this section will outline the results we expect from this study. First, considering partnership trajectories, based upon previous studies, we would expect that women from South Asian backgrounds would be more likely to transition directly from single to married compared to natives and other migrant groups, and less likely to enter into cohabitation. We would expect this trajectory for the South Asian group across all migrant generations but that the risk of direct marriage may be lower for the 1.5G and 2G groups (Hannemann, et al., 2020). When exploring outcomes of those in cohabiting relationships, we may also expect some differences across migrant groups and their descendants. For the native population we may expect that most women would transition from cohabiting to married, although a significant proportion would also experience a birth while cohabiting. Results will also be expected to show that, when compared to natives, some migrant groups, such as those from the Caribbeans, may be more likely to transition to parenthood while cohabiting, while others may be less likely to have children within cohabiting relationships (Mikolai & Kulu, 2022). When exploring the likelihood of separation among married sample members, we would also expect differences between migrant groups and across migrant generations with lower rates of separation for South Asian groups for both migrants and their descendants, however it may be the case that descendants for South Asian migrants may be more likely to experience a separation compared to their parents. Overall, our expectation would be that first-generation migrants from South Asian backgrounds would follow more conservative partnership and family building trajectories compared to the native population and other migrant groups. We may also expect that this more traditional pattern

of trajectories will also be observed among their descendants, although to a lesser degree (Harrison, et al., 2023). When taking into account employment trajectories, we would anticipate that there will be differences in the likelihood of entering the labour market between migrant groups, particularly for women. Previous research by Khoudja & Platt (2018) may also suggest that we may find differences in transitions between employment states between migrant groups following the birth of a child or change in partnership status. Informed by previous research conducted in Belgium (Kil, et al., 2018), it may also be the case that the birth of a child will weaken women's attachment to the labour market for both migrant groups and their descendants. This is supported by findings from the French context which found that childbearing had a negative impact on women's labour market outcomes, however, this varied across migrant groups.

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