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Socioeconomic status and fertility before, during, and after the demographic transition: An introduction

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Abstract

Background: Despite a long interest in the historical fertility transition, there is still a lack of knowledge about disaggregated patterns that could help us understand the mechanisms behind the transition. In previous research the widely held view is that there was a change in the association between social status and fertility in conjunction with the fertility transition, implying that fertility went from being positively connected to social status (higher status was connected with higher fertility) to being negatively associated with fertility.

Objective: The aim of this collection is to study socioeconomic patterns in the fertility transition in a variety of contexts using similar approaches and measures of socioeconomic status.

Methods: All contributions use different kinds of micro-level socioeconomic and demographic data and statistical models in the analysis. Data either come from census-like records or population registers.

Conclusions: There is no consistent evidence for the hypothesis that socioeconomic status was positively related to fertility before the demographic transition. While such a correlation was clearly present in some contexts it was clearly not in other contexts. There is more unanimous support for the idea that the upper-and middle classes acted as forerunners in the transition, while especially farmers were late to change their fertility behavior. It is also evident that both parity-specific stopping and prolonged birth intervals (spacing) were important in the fertility transition.

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