Social context of first birth timing in a rapidly changing rural setting

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the influence of social context on the rate of first birth. Drawing on socialization models, I develop a theoretical framework to explain how different aspects of social context (i.e., neighbors), may affect the rate of first birth. Neighbors, who in the study setting comprise individuals’ immediate social context, have an important influence on the rate of first birth. To test my hypotheses, I leverage a setting, measures and analytical techniques designed to study the impact of macro-level social contexts on micro-level individual behavior. The results show that neighbors’ age at first birth, travel to the capital city and media exposure tend to reduce the first birth rate, while neighbors’ non-family work experience increases first birth rate. These effects are independent of neighborhood characteristics and are robust against several key variations in model specifications.

1. Introduction

Despite appealing theoretical reasoning and empirical evidence of contextual influence on individual preferences and behavior, demographic research on the pace of childbearing still largely revolves around the influence of individual factors. A large body of empirical literature has shown that patterns of social interactions can help explain the dramatic changes in social and demographic behaviors (Casterline, 2001; Kohler, 2001; Kohler et al., 2001; Palloni, 2001). Using data from a rapidly changing rural setting in Nepal, this paper examines the influence of social context on the rate of first birth. The theoretical framework that guides this investigation draws on socialization models that consider a wide range of contextual effects on individuals’ first birth timing. Specifically, this study examines the influence of immediate social context, especially neighbors with whom individuals interact on a day-to-day basis (Caplan, 2000; Fricke, 1988; Yabiku, 2004).

This investigation contributes to theories of contextual influence in three important ways. First, by utilizing a rapidly changing, rural, agricultural context for which contextual influence of fertility theories were initially designed to apply, this study investigates the influence of local context in a setting outside of Western European and North American societies. This evidence from a radically different social, economic and cultural context provides the means to examine external validity and verify the potential universal nature of contextual influence. At the same time, the potential that such contextual influences may vary across diverse societies provides crucial empirical insight into the nature and limits of this mechanism.

Second, building on the nature of local interactions this study operationalizes context at a very proximal level (i.e. neighbors with whom respondents interact on a daily basis). In most rural settings, immediate social and geophysical characteristics of the community exert a particularly strong influence on individual behavior (Axinn and Fricke, 1996; Entwisle et al., 1989; McNicoll, 1980, 1984, 1994) which is true in rural Nepal as much of Nepalese daily social life is organized near the home (Caplan, 2000; Yabiku, 2005).

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Third, unlike most previous studies of contextual influence that combined individuals’ social milieu with the structural characteristics of their geographical locale, this study uses separate measures for social and physical characteristics, which is crucial to understanding the causal mechanisms of contextual influence (Zajonc, 1968; Yabiku, 2005). Thus, this study provides important insights on the influence of social context in relation to structural context.

In addition, community-level influences on the speed of entry into marriage and the timing of termination of childbearing are relatively well understood (Axinn and Yabiku, 2001; Brewster et al., 1993; Entwisle et al., 1989; Hogan and Kitagawa, 1985; Yabiku, 2006a,b). Despite strong theoretical reasons to expect community-level influences on the pace of childbearing, these influences are much less well understood. The time from marriage to first birth is a particularly crucial period in which young couples’ pre-existing desires to have children must confront the social context surrounding their individual decisions and actions. This transition to parenthood also has long-term consequences for the total number of children couples are able to produce within their fecund years (Bongaarts, 1978, 1982). Thus, within the context of a relatively high fertility regime and pervasive young-age motherhood, the study of contextual influence on transition to parenthood is crucial from a policy perspective as well.

1.1. Theoretical framework

The impact of social context on individuals’ preferences and behavior has been a central concern of sociologists throughout history of the discipline. Although there are notable variations, virtually all major social theories (Alexander, 1988; Coleman, 1990; Durkheim [1893], 1984; Mills, 1959) suggest an important influence of social context on individuals’ attitudes and behaviors. Durkheim ([1893], 1984) posits that individual preferences and behaviors are shaped, and even controlled, by social context primarily through the “moral power” of the society. This power is exercised via the moral consciousness, moral structure, and moral constitution of societies—or their “common ideas, beliefs, values, customs, and tendencies.” Mills (1959) puts it simply: “What ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they live; their vision and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighborhood …” (p. 3). Thus young individuals’ relationships with neighbors not only allow for the transmission of local norms and attitudes but also provide a framework for various aspects of social life.

Contemporary sociologists have employed contextual models to understand the ways that individuals’ social contexts—their families, communities, personal networks, and community, ethnic and racial composition—shape their lives in a broad range of substantive areas (Jencks and Mayer, 1990; Connell and Halpern-Felsher, 1997; Entwisle et al., 1994). The notion of relating context to fertility behavior has been a central theme in social demography since the early 1980s (Smith, 1989), and has included studies of adolescent sexual behavior (Billy et al., 1994; Brewster, 1994; Crane, 1991; Smith, 1989; South and Baumer, 2000), as well as family formation and fertility (Hogan and Kitagawa, 1985). However, almost all of these studies face common problems of representation of context and mediating processes (Duncan et al., 1997; Huckfeldt, 1983; Tienda, 1991). For example, Connell and Halpern-Felsher (1997) admit that their results point to an “enormous gap in our empirical representation of processes mediating neighborhood effects on adolescent outcomes” (p. 197).

Using a non-Western, rural setting and a salient research design, the present study has made significant progress in both the representation of the context and mediating processes. This study operationalizes context at a very local level—the neighborhood—where most daily interactions take place. Thus, context, in this study refers to a shared geographic locale of 5–15 household groupings (Barber et al., 1997), called Tole in Nepali. The Nepali word Tole closely corresponds to the meaning of the English word neighborhood and will subsequently be referred to as neighborhood. The neighborhood context can be described by both the population composition and the location attributes of where individuals interact with one another. This study focuses on the social component: neighbors.

Although in many settings individuals interact with a wide variety of people in their daily lives, in Chitwan, a majority of neighborhoods are cohesive communities with dense daily interactions and functional interdependence. Therefore, neighbors comprise a significant component of all social contact and serve as a crucial social network. In Chitwan, neighbors tend to be functionally interdependent, know one another well, and for many years see each other often and rely greatly on one another. Neighbors are particularly crucial in emergencies, sharing common resources and socialization in the long term (Caplan, 2000; Litwak and Szelényi, 1969; Massey, 1987; Yabiku, 2004, 2005).

Bongaarts and Watkins (1996) argue that fertility and family size preferences are greatly influenced by interactions with others, most importantly by those with whom individuals interact on a day-to-day basis. Although Bongaarts and Watkins (1996) see the potential influence of social interaction outside of one’s immediate community, they believe that social interaction among individuals of similar socioeconomic status, cultural background, age, and proximity has the strongest influence on demographic behavior. McNicoll (1980, 1984, 1994) supports this view for our setting, asserting: “In many parts of Europe and Asia, rural communities defined by residence exercised influence over behavior of members” (McNicoll, 1980:453).

In Nepal, local-level interactions are mostly limited to neighbors (chhimeki in Nepali). Neighborhoods are generally clusters of households connected through informal ties. Neighbors tend to be very closely involved in one another’s lives, sharing time, physical resources and personal joys and sorrows—often throughout a lifetime. The special meaning of neighbors is captured in the Nepali phrase “Jeuda ka janti marda ka malami” which means that neighbors are with you when you go get your bride as well as when your body is taken to be cremated. Thus, neighbors in Nepal are generally much more central to daily life than are those who share census tracts in the United States and other Western countries. Caplan (2000) emphasizes this point in his ethnographic work in Nepal:

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