

Fertility Patterns in England, 1600-1800: The Early Demographic Transition of the Middle Class

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Abstract: We investigate the socio-economic fertility differential in England in the 17th and 18th centuries using data collected by the Cambridge Group. As shown in an earlier paper based on this data, prior to the 1700's the richer groups of society had higher fertility than the poorer groups (Boberg-Fazlic, Sharp and Weisdorf forthcoming). However, by 1800 this pattern was reversed with the poorest groups of society exhibiting highest fertility. The rich thus started limiting their fertility already in the beginning of the 18th century, much earlier than the onset of the demographic transition as generally considered. This finding is in line with other studies on England and France (Clark and Cummins 2010, Cummins 2009). In this paper, we use the Cambridge Group data to study this reversal of the differential fertility pattern in greater detail, investigating how the rich limited fertility and offering a possible explanation as to why the first fertility transition took place among this social group. In order to answer the first question, we particularly look at age at marriage, parity-specific stopping behavior as well as spacing and age-specific fertility effects by socio-economic group. We show that especially delayed marriage and the use of parity-specific stopping behavior led the richer groups to have fewer children, indicating a very conscious choice involved in the fertility decline. The latter question of possible reasons behind the choice of limiting fertility is more difficult to answer. One factor, often put forward, is a decline in child mortality preceding the demographic transition. We investigate differential child mortality between the social groups, finding no significant effect. Another popular explanation of the demographic transition, especially within Unified Growth Theory, is a quantity/quality trade-off, where the increasing importance of education leads parents to reduce fertility but increase the educational investment in each child. We thus consider the differential impact of education on the different social groups and their fertility behavior. The positive fertility differential earlier in the period seems to be mostly explained by income, approximated by each family's social group. However, as fertility declines in the richer groups the educational status of the family, approximated by parental literacy, seems to be gaining importance. We observe that the effect of parental literacy on fertility changes from being insignificant or slightly negative to positive for the rich groups of society. Interestingly, this shift happens at the same time as these groups start to limit their fertility. This leads us to conclude that a changing role of education might indeed have played a role in the early fertility transition among the rich.