

Children Can Wait Women Working in Higher-Status Occupations Tend to Postpone Family Formation

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In recent decades, the presence of women in the workforce has increasingly been taken for granted, especially among young women. At the same time, we see that the age at which women give birth to their first child has risen over the same time period. Working women are especially likely to postpone family formation if their occupational situation is marked by uncertainty, for instance due to short-term unemployment or part-time work. How much income can I expect to earn? Is my job secure? These are the kinds of questions that women find increasingly important.

So far, there has been little research on whether certain characteristics of female-typed occupations have a systematic influence on the time period between career entry and the birth of the first child. To answer this question, we studied employment security as one characteristic of occupations. Instead of defining individual dimensions of employment security, we took a closer look at occupational closure. This characteristic affects many different dimensions of employment security and is closely linked to it.

Occupations may be classified into open and closed occupations, depending on the degree of closure. What matters for this distinction is the extent to which entry into an occupation is tied to a certain type of educational degree or qualification. We summarized the various types of degrees in six categories: no degree, general high school degree, vocational training degree, master craftsman's degree, university of applied science degree, and university degree. The crucial aspect with respect to occupational closure is whether an occupation is dominated by a single type of degree.

Closed and open occupations

In the case of open occupations, access to the relevant activities and positions is not as strongly regulated, and although certain types of degrees are preferred, they are not formally required. As a consequence, we often find individuals with different kinds of degrees working in these occupations. Open occupations typically pursued by women include, among others, cleaning workers and geriatric nurses, but also social education workers or librarians.

Closed and open occupations differ systematically with regard to employment perspectives. Earnings and employment security are high in closed occupations; they are lower in open occupations. For example, workers in closed occupations earn higher hourly wages and incomes, and they are less likely to work part time than workers in open occupations. Moreover, on average, they spend longer periods with one and the same employer and change occupations less frequently. In other words, closed occupations offer a higher degree of security in terms of employment stability and duration.

These clear differences suggest that, depending on the degree of closure and the associated employment security in a given occupation, the time period between career entry and family formation will differ between women. The theory and empirical findings from previous studies allow for two different lines of argument regarding the influence that the abovementioned occupational characteristics may have on the timing of family formation.

Summary: Young women face different extents of employment security depending on the occupation they work in. Studying the link between characteristics of occupations and the timing of family formation of young women shows that the occupational setting proves highly relevant for the timing of the birth of the first child. Women in occupations with good employment security do postpone their family formation compared to women in occupations with poorer levels of employment security. This implies that these women practice different models of work-family-balance with differing drawbacks for their occupational engagement..

One possibility for women would be to follow the principle that security is most important. Having a secure economic basis can be seen as a precondition for family formation. Of course, the constellation in the household or between the partners matters as well in this context. But women's current employment situation and their future career prospects do play a decisive role. Good employment prospects give women a comparatively high degree of security in terms of their future career, and that security is mostly found in closed occupations. Accordingly, re-entering the workplace after childbirth should also be easier under such conditions. The conclusion to be drawn from this is that women are more likely to decide in favor of family formation if they work in closed occupations.

The difficulties of re-entry

But there is another possibility: women might also think that what matters most is flexibility. If women working in closed occupations interrupt their employment while they are still in their early-career stages, it may be difficult for them to return to their former position after childbirth. Since entry into closed occupations is closely tied to certain degrees, there are relatively clear-cut policies regarding the mandatory qualifications. At labor market entry, it is the degree that proves the existence of these qualifications; afterwards, the best proof that the qualifications continue to exist and that they are being expanded is continuous employment in that occupation. A family-related interruption, by contrast, tends to diminish the required skills and abilities, which makes it more difficult for women to return to their former positions.

The inferior employment perspectives in open occupations mean that there is a higher level of turnover and flexibility. Open occupations are dominated by insecure and precarious employment situations, but women know that these occupations may offer opportunities for re-entry, or even re-orientation, after a family-related interruption. This kind of thinking suggests that women are more likely to start a family if they work in open occupations.

Occupational flexibility is what matters most

Now what are our empirical findings? Our analyses are based on the data of the German National Educational Panel Study (NEPS), which we analyzed using methods of event data analysis. For the most part, they confirm the second scenario: occupational flexibility is the crucial factor. Women entering open occupations when first entering the labor market give birth to their first child 28 months earlier, on average, than women entering closed occupations. That difference, however, only begins to emerge in the years following labor market entry. In the beginning, there is hardly any difference, but as time goes by, the difference becomes very clear and continues to grow. Five years after entering the workforce, for example, about 30 percent of women working in open occupations have children, compared to about 25 percent of women working in closed occupations.

Ten years after entering the workforce (the majority of women is between 26 and 36 years old at that point), about 50 percent of women in open occupations have children, compared to only 41 percent of women in closed occupations. These findings are based on calculations of a piecewise constant exponential model, taking account of additional individual characteristics such as age at labor market entry, gender, birth cohort, type of employment, and education.

Women working in closed occupations thus substantially postpone family formation despite, or possibly even because of, their superior employment perspectives. The relatively high degree of flexibility in open occupations seems to cause the early timing of family formation. At the same time, our findings indicate that mothers tend to work in unstable, less well-paying, and less secure jobs. This means that they are much more forced into the role of secondary wage earner, and hence also depend much more on their partner's income. As a con-



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sequence, the concept of balancing work and family often involves substantial career setbacks for women working in open occupations.

Our findings show that for women, the general framework of an occupation has direct effects on their planning and decision in favor of family formation. Obviously, good employment prospects alone are not the decisive factor. Further studies should aim at identifying additional mechanisms that cause women in closed occupations to postpone family formation. One question that still needs to be answered, for example, is whether this is a selection process, that is, whether women in closed occupations want to have children at a later point in their lives anyways. Or whether their postponing of family formation is caused by a regional lack of childcare services, which is a major obstacle especially for women with excellent career prospects.

References

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