

Competing Pleasures? Quantity and Quality of Leisure and the Transition to Parenthood

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Abstract

Economic theory predicts that the anticipated costs of children play a major role in fertility decisions. Traditionally, these costs have been referred solely to the monetary dimension. It has been shown in various empirical studies that income- and job-related opportunity costs of mothers (e.g., forgone earnings, loss of human capital due to parental leave, etc.) contribute to delayed timing of and to a reduced transition rate to parenthood. However, this focus on monetary costs of children neglects potential losses of other, rather intangible resources such as the time available for leisure activities. The present study intends to fill this gap by relating several dimensions of leisure to the risk of first-time parenthood.

Using data from the GSOEP (waves G through W), we analyze the impact of both quantity and specific types of leisure activities on the risk of the transition to parenthood two years later ($n \approx 2500$ women). With regard to the amount of leisure time (the quantitative dimension), it is found that the strongly leisure-oriented women exhibit a lower risk of first motherhood (a) if no close family members live nearby who may provide informal childcare support, and (b) if they are living in a nonmarital (as opposed to a marital) cohabitation. Analyses concerning the qualitative dimension of leisure yield clear timing effects: Both male and female respondents with a strong preference for outdoor leisure activities tend to delay their first births. However, at the age of 41 years, they end up with a level of childlessness comparable to those who engage in outdoor activities less frequently. No similar delaying effects could be found for indoor activities. In sum, the results suggest that, even after controlling for age and socioeconomic characteristics, leisure constitutes an important type of opportunity costs that has largely been neglected in existing fertility research.

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