Understanding fertility intentions: Their modification and achievement over the life course

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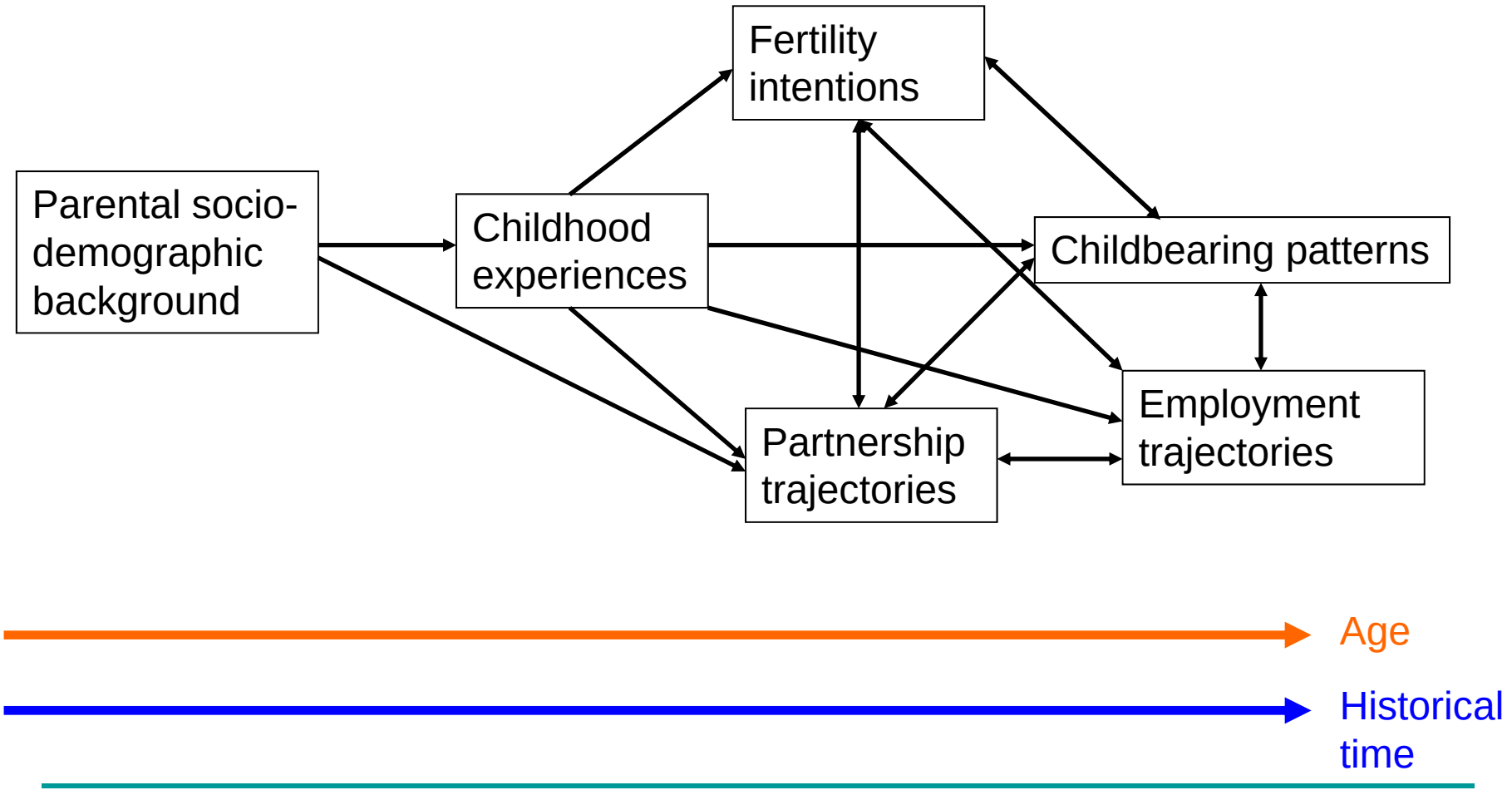
Motivation (1) Childbearing patterns

- Understanding patterns of family building across birth cohorts: postponement & recuperation
- UK context:
  - Persistently high teenage parenthood in context of rising mean age at first birth
  - Relative high progression to 2nd ,3rd, & 4th birth in context of significant childlessness

Motivation (2) The need to take a life course approach

- What factors are associated with development of intentions early in the life course?
- Are family building intentions expressed by adolescents useful predictors of fertility behaviour over next 30 years?
- How are intentions modified over the life course?
- What can we learn from taking a life course approach about the factors which facilitate or impede achievement of these intentions? (e.g. Liefbroer, 2009; Iacovou & Travares, 2010; Morgan and Rackin, 2010; Berrington & Pattaro, 2011)

Figure 1. Analytical framework



Data: The National Child Development Study (NCDS)

- 17,000 British births from March 1958
- Parental background and childhood circumstances at 0, 7, 11, 16
- Adult cohort member interviewed at 23, 33, 42, 46 and 50
- Retrospective event histories
- Missing data

Socio-economic context

	1974 Age 16	1981 Age 23	1991 Age 33	2000 Age 42	2004 Age 46
Demographic context					
Completed Family Size at 46	2.24	2.42	2.19	2.02	1.99
Mean Age at First Birth	24.0	24.8	25.7	27.1	27.5
Socio-economic context					
Recession	No	Yes	Yes	No	No

RQ 1. What factors influence early intentions(age 16)?

- At age 16 (1974) males and females born in 1958 intended to have an average family size of 2.31 and 2.57 respectively.
- This varied only a little according to background characteristics.
- However, they were also asked "At what age would you ideally like to start a family?"
- Large social variation in anticipated timing of fertility

Figure 2. Age best to start a family by father's social class – females aged 16

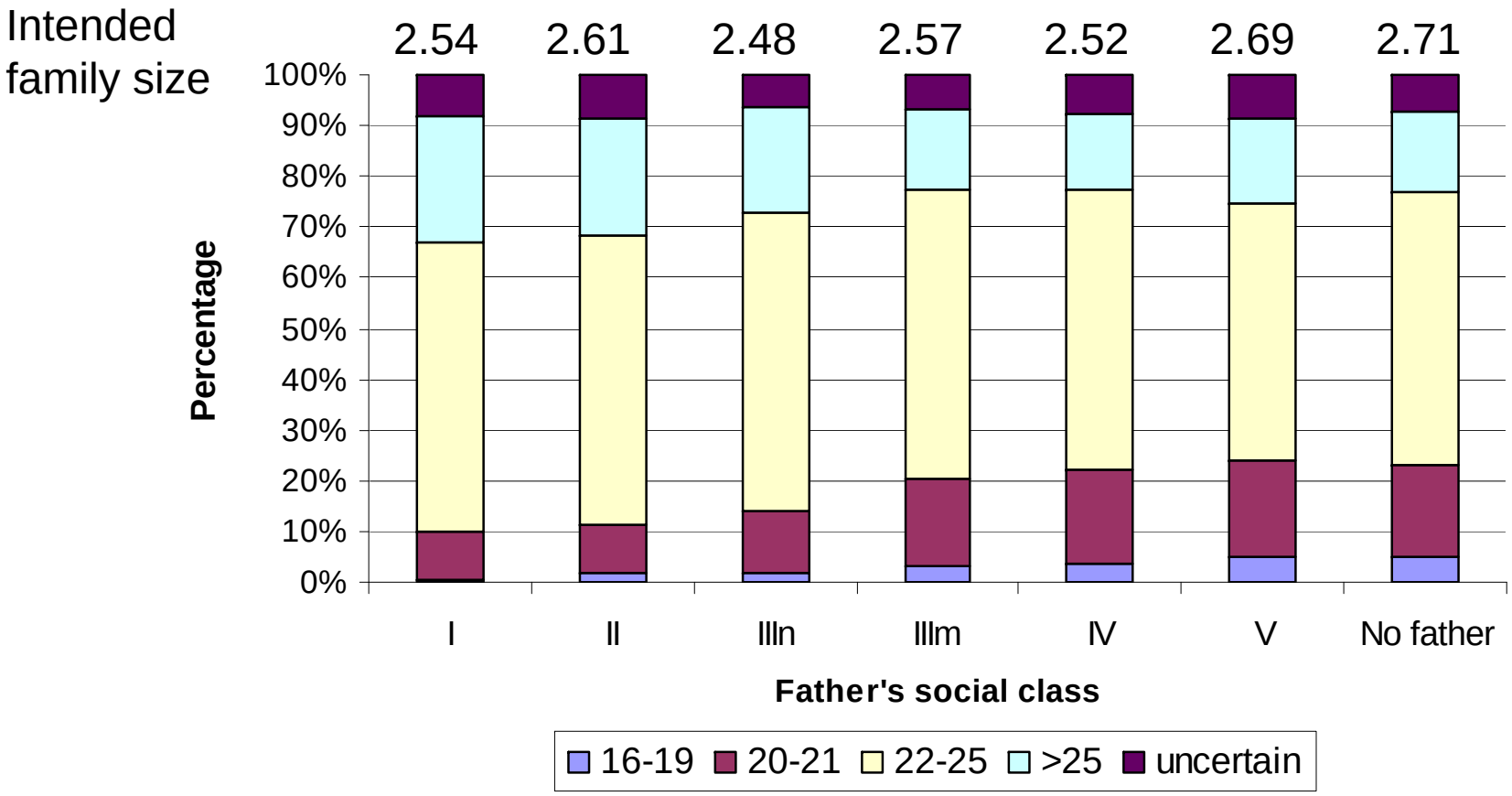
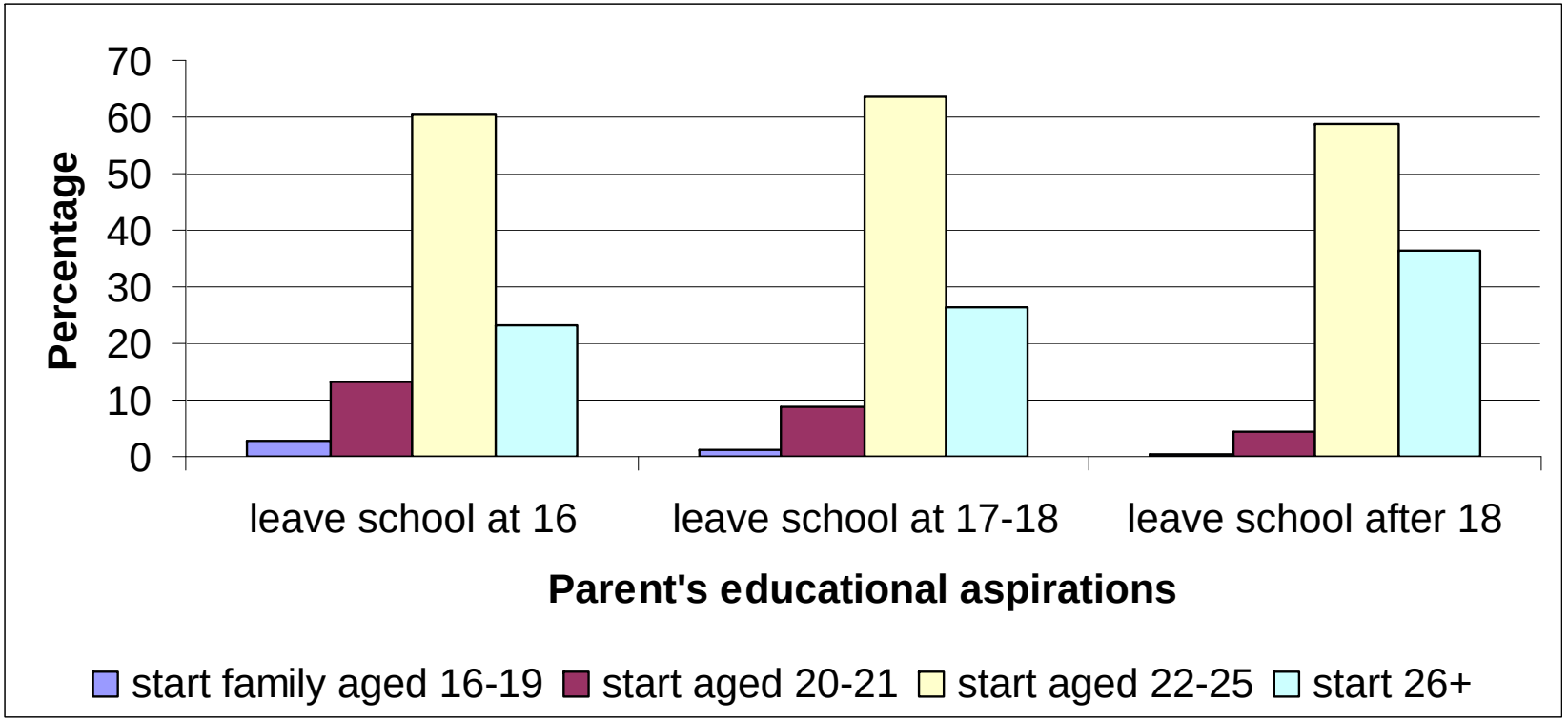


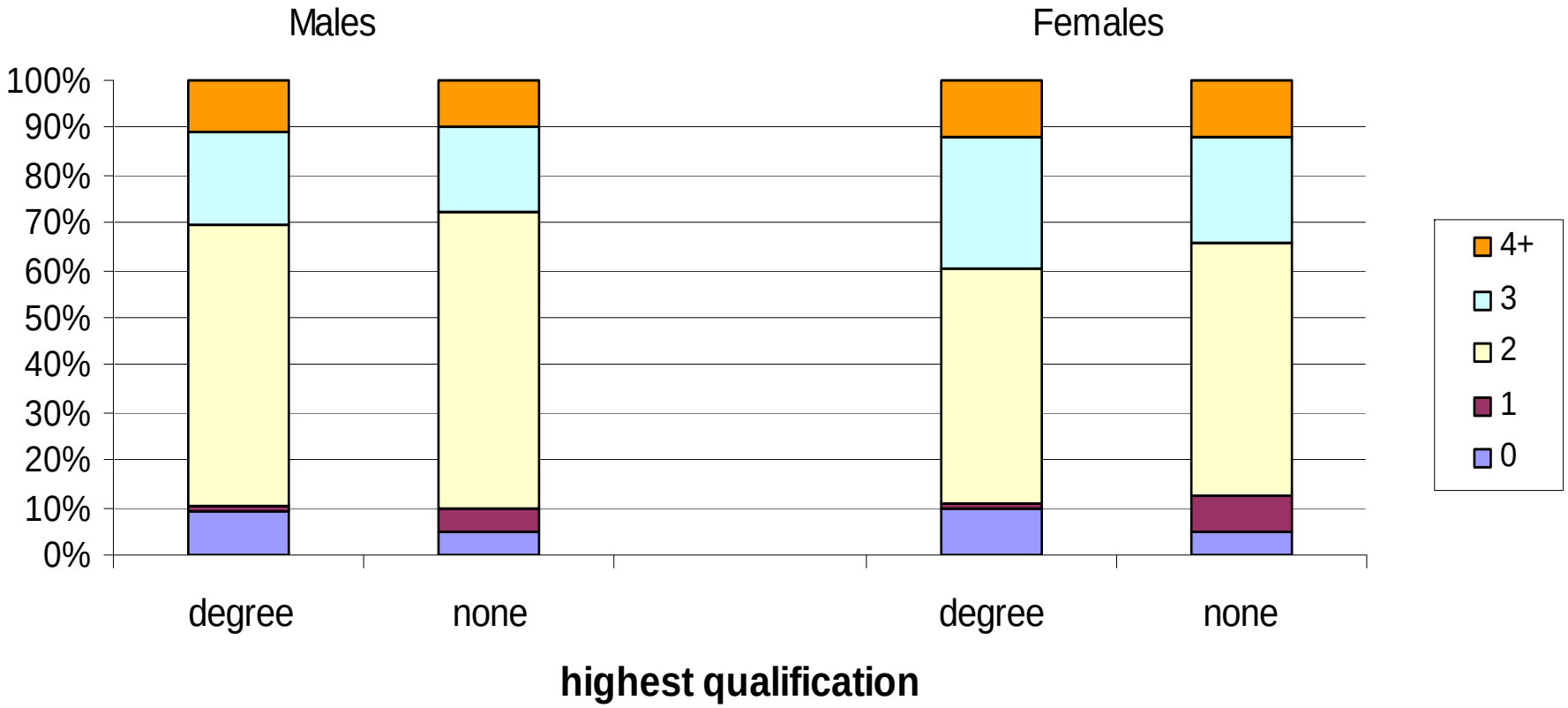
Figure 3: Age best to start a family by parent's aspirations for own education - females aged 16



RQ2 How are intentions modified in early adulthood (between age 16 and 23)?

- Reduction in mean intended family size compared with age 16
  - 2.31 to 2.21 for men
  - 2.57 to 2.29 for women
- Relatively few intended to remain childless, although higher among those with degree education
  - particularly female employers and managers
- Around one third want to have 3+ children, even women with degrees

Figure 4: Intended family size distribution by education. Males and females aged 23.



RQ3 How do intentions early in life relate to achieved fertility?

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Table 1: Achieved parity at age 46 by intended parity at age 23, males and females

Achieved parity at age 46	Males Intended parity at age 23						Females Intended parity at age 23					
	0	1	2	3	4+	uncertain	0	1	2	3	4+	uncertain
0	50.0	23.6	21.0	14.8	15.1	30.0	59.0	7.5	14.2	10.3	11.7	22.9
1	15.6	41.8	16.0	11.3	10.9	15.2	16.9	26.6	14.2	9.2	9.2	12.5
2	22.2	17.3	42.3	38.9	32.6	38.3	19.7	40.9	51.6	40.5	31.5	39.7
3	10.6	11.8	16.0	24.4	26.7	12.1	3.2	11.8	16.3	30.4	24.1	15.0
4+	1.7	5.5	4.8	10.7	14.7	4.4	1.2	3.2	3.7	9.6	23.4	9.9
Total (n=100%)	180	110	2262	656	258	454	249	186	2121	884	444	433

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1	15.6	41.8	16.0	11.3	10.9	15.2	16.9	26.6	14.2	9.2	9.2	12.5
2	22.2	17.3	42.3	38.9	32.6	38.3	19.7	40.9	51.6	40.5	31.5	39.7
3	10.6	11.8	16.0	24.4	26.7	12.1	3.2	11.8	16.3	30.4	24.1	15.0
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2	22.2	17.3	42.3	38.9	32.6	38.3	19.7	40.9	51.6	40.5	31.5	39.7
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RQ4 What factors facilitate or impede achievement of fertility intentions?

- Compare intended and achieved fertility
  (Morgan & Rackin, 2010)

Error = Mean of the signed difference between achieved family size at age 46 and intended family size at age 23.

Bivariate relationships – but relationships hold in multiple regression analyses

Table 2: Relationship between intended (at age 23) and achieved (at age 46) fertility by age at first birth and education - females

Females	Mean achieved fertility at age 23 interview	Mean intended fertility at age 23	Mean achieved fertility at age 46	Error	Sample size
Actual age at first birth					
<20	1.92	2.59	2.70	0.11	409
20-23	1.12	2.39	2.44	0.04	927
24-29	0	2.37	2.17	-0.20	1283
30-34	0	2.29	1.91	-0.38	464
35+	0	2.23	1.47	-0.77	197
Remained childless	0	1.84	0.00	-1.84	604
Education at age 23					
Degree level	0.02	2.34	1.64	-0.70	373
Advanced level	0.17	2.31	1.73	-0.58	815
Ordinary level	0.46	2.28	1.88	-0.40	1675
Below Ordinary level	0.89	2.32	2.11	-0.21	1021

Males	Mean achieved fertility at age 23	Mean intended fertility at age 23	Mean achieved fertility at age 46	Error	Sample size
Employment & earnings at 23					
F.t. high earner	0.24	2.19	1.91	-0.28	921
F.t. med. earner	0.23	2.24	1.75	-0.50	1021
F.t. low earner	0.19	2.21	1.58	-0.64	751
Enrolled in FTE	0.06	2.47	1.65	-0.82	104
Unemployed	0.34	2.20	1.59	-0.61	310
Other inactive	0.19	2.47	1.28	-1.19	32
Marital transitions					
Remained never married	0.04	2.08	0.35	-1.73	336
Got married	0.03	2.26	1.83	-0.43	1084
Got married but later separated	0.03	2.26	1.43	-0.83	703
Married at 23, stayed married	0.44	2.20	2.15	-0.05	663
Married at 23 but later separated. not remarry	0.65	2.29	2.15	-0.13	363
Married at 23, got divorced and remarried	0.58	2.17	2.27	0.10	259
Separated at 23 all trajectories	0.56	2.31	1.98	-0.33	55

Summary (1/5)

- Development of childbearing intentions
  - At age 16, fertility intentions over optimistic
  - Even at age 16, large differences in expected timing according to socio-economic background.
  - Intended family size much less dependent on parents socio-economic status or parental aspirations for schooling.

Summary (2/5)

- Modification of childbearing intentions
  - Intended family size reduced between 16 and 23
  - Degree education associated with increased intentions to remain childless, but even within this group the proportion was low
  - Degree educated men and women not want one child
  - Much more uncertainty at age 23

Summary (3/5)

- Childbearing outcomes
  - Highly educated women delayed entry into motherhood and were more likely to remain childless
  - Male graduates not so penalised
  - But among those that had at least one child, more educated tended not to stop at one child
  - Recuperation did not seem to be a problem at the aggregate level for “later starters”

Summary (4/5)

- Relationship between intentions and childbearing outcomes
  - Overall tendency to under-achieve intended family size
  - Fertility intentions have a greater predictive power for females than for males
  - Even intentions at age 16 associated with outcomes at age 46 net of other life course experiences (tend to act through partnership behaviour)

Summary (5/5)

- Facilitators and impediments to the achievement of intentions
  - High economic opportunity costs early childbearing
    - Highly educated women, especially those who were in full time work at 23
  - Poor status on the marriage market
    - Men who were unemployed / economically inactive
  - Partnership dissolution
    - Often associated with having a single child
  - Early marriage, divorce and second marriage
    - Can be associated with higher parities – more so for men

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