

Engendering definitions of social inequality with descriptions of reproductive difference: Fertility achievement differences among men and between women and menⁱ

Averil Y. Clarke
Suffolk University
averil.clarke@suffolk.edu

September 26, 2014

ABSTRACT

This paper describes reproductive inequalities, including gender differences in family formation experience and race and education level differences in these experiences among men. Using male and female respondent files of the National Survey of Family Growth (NCHS 2006-2010), it describes privilege and disadvantage in romantic relationship formation and unwanted pregnancy. Measurement of levels of reproductive inequality augments scholarly use of social group differences in economic or productive sector outcomes to support inequality claims. Furthermore, adding men and differences among men to the list of social hierarchies in which reproductive differences are typically described (i.e., race and class differences among women) facilitates description of multiple social hierarchies in the same reproductive terms and creates additional options for studying intersecting inequalities. Preliminary analyses show race and education level differences in marital experience and unwanted pregnancies are higher among women and between women and men than they are among men.

EXTENDED ABSTRACT

This paper describes gender differences in family formation experience and race and education level differences in these experiences among men. It delineates these differences in an effort to meaningfully describe that which inequality scholarship might refer to as “reproductive inequality”, “reproductive privilege”, and “reproductive disadvantage” and to identify those race-gender groups that might be understood as reproductive winners and losers. This quantitative measurement of the level of reproductive inequality that prevails among men and between women and men critiques and augments scholarly efforts to empirically support claims about social group inequality using observations of social group differences in economic or productive sector outcomes.

By focusing the measurement of inequality on reproductive rather than productive sector activity, these descriptions of reproductive inequality expand social inequality knowledge in ways that reflect, first of all, criticism emerging from cultural feminism. Cultural feminists criticize the devaluation and ignoring of those experiences, activities, and goals that are associated with females. An inequality scholarship tradition that documents the association of women with reproduction and then neglects discussion of the “value”, “advantage”, and “status” of that which is in the reproductive arena results in the ongoing creation of a gender unequal version of inequality knowledge. Measuring reproductive privilege and differences in the level of reproductive opportunity or favorable reproductive experiences and outcomes attempts to correct or amend social scientific study of inequality with respect to this gender bias.

This paper’s descriptions and measures of reproductive inequality among men and between men and women also expand social inequality knowledge in ways that reflect criticism emerging from intersectionality theory. Such criticism supports increased attention to the connections, dependent relationships, consistencies, and inconsistencies that exist across inequalities of class, race, and gender. Generating measures and statistics that support analyses of gender inequality in reproduction and of race and education level inequalities among men adds to the prevailing list of social hierarchies in which reproductive differences are currently described – i.e., racial and class inequalities among women. Adding men and differences among men facilitates description of multiple social hierarchies in the same reproductive terms, thereby creating additional options for studying intersecting inequalities.

And finally, this paper’s description of reproductive differences among men and between men and women augments literature on family demography. Demographic research has long provided descriptions of the ways family formation processes have led to population outcomes. In modern fertility regimes, this has often meant describing the way women’s marriage, contraceptive and abortion decision-making has given rise to low or very low fertility. Similarly, attention has been given to increases in the portion of unmarried women bearing children and what amounts to the maintenance of replacement or above replacement fertility despite less marriage and greater divorce. This paper adds men’s perspectives

roles, and experience in modern family making to this literature. Alongside ethnographic discussion of single women's childbearing, gay men and women's family formation, the use and impact of assisted reproductive technologies by gay and heterosexual couples and singles, this paper provides descriptions of men's experience of wanted and unwanted pregnancy and the significance of marriage in men's family formation. It discusses the degree to which there are social group inequalities in these reproductive experiences among men and whether and to what extent they parallel disparities among women.

Since individuals do not all desire very high numbers of children (in the same way as we might all agree that a higher income is a good thing) I measure reproductive inequality using indicators of the desirability of and apparent control over family formation outcomes. Arguing that social group differences in such control are constitutive of reproductive inequality, I include analyses of (1) the experience of unwanted pregnancy among different race-gender-education level groups and analyses of (2) the significance of marriage and union formation to family formation among the different race-gender-education level groups. In the first of these analyses I use the female and male respondent files of the National Survey of Family Growth (NCHS 2006-2010) to calculate differences in the ratio of unwanted to total pregnancies, differences in the portion of group fertility that is the result of unwanted pregnancy resolved in birth, and race and gender group differences in the resolution of unwanted and wanted pregnancies. These measures reflect reproductive control or the ability or resources to manipulate fertility around desired ends. Historically, women's lack of reproductive control has been seen as indicative of disadvantage and exploitative experience in families, the sexual and reproductive or adoption economies, and in patriarchal gender relations more broadly speaking. Insofar as those groups that indicate greater experience of unwanted pregnancy in the context of family formation and whose resolution of wanted pregnancies reflect disproportionately high fractions of induced and spontaneous abortions exhibit less control of their family formation destinies.

Relationships between marriage and childbearing remain complex with respect to their ability to indicate reproductive control and inequality. Historically, marriage has not always reflected individual choice and romantic freedom but rather men's and women's responsiveness to broader familial and even

local or national community needs and goals. I consequently measure differences in romantic opportunity using NSFG male and female respondent files (NCHS 2006-2010) to calculate fractions of race-gender-education level groups that have ever married and that have ever cohabited and group likelihoods of experiencing wanted pregnancies in the context of such unions.

The study's preliminary findings indicate that race and education level differences in marriage and unwanted pregnancy experience parallel such differences among women, with black men and women and with women and men with no high school diploma experiencing lower marriage and higher unwanted pregnancy. But such differences are significantly smaller among male respondents in the NSFG (NCHS 2006-2010) than among women. Moreover, gender differences in marriage experience and unwanted pregnancy appear larger than these race and class differences among men. The paper concludes with discussion of the consequences of parallel but unequal reproductive inequalities for the different social groups.

ⁱ Please do not reproduce or cite without author's permission.