

Are you ready now for another child? How partner satisfaction times the decision to have the second child in Australia.

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In most of the Western countries individuals' desired number of children is usually higher than the complete couple's fertility realization and for most of the couples is not a matter of fertility renunciation but more of fertility postponement. If the first child is something "normative" (Rindfuss et al. 1988), the decision to have a second or a third child seems to be the real obstacle for gaining an higher fertility (Billari & Kohler, 2009). Why couples decide to postpone or not having the second child? Up to now this seems the crucial question to understand low fertility in the Western countries.

Traditionally low fertility has been studied focusing on women's difficult trade-off between the double role of mother and worker (Becker, 1991) and the lack of adequate policies to support family needs and female preferences and expectations (McDonald et al., 2000; Rindfuss et al., 1996). Nevertheless the lack of perspectives on the changes that occur in the couple with the transition to parenthood have been rarely associated to couples' decision to have a second child, and few studies focused on what happens in the couple after the arrival of the first child (Cowan, 1985; Wallace & Gotlib, 1990; Callan, 1985; Callan 1986).

Usually the arrival of the first child obliges new-parents to face a stressful period of adjustment to the new condition of parents. The process of redefinition of priorities, needs and preferences during the first year with the child impact on couple's marital adjustment and satisfaction with the family and work life (Wiki, 1999; Callan, 1985). Couples becoming parents report an increase of conflict and disagreement, losing part of the condition of "lover" in the relationship with the partner (Cowan, 1985). Even if the loss of satisfaction is usually transitory and short term (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; MacDermid, 1990; Cox, 1999; Twenge, 2003; Lawrence, Rothman et al., 2008), some couples need longer time, or never recover the previous level of well being (Moss, 1986). These couples do not solve (or solve partially) the crisis in the relationship with the partner sometimes reducing their fertility expectation. What happens to couple's fertility realization when the adjustment process is too long? Which kind of adjustment can make more difficult the transition to the second child?

The literature points out how the most important factors for deciding to have a second child are conditioned by the satisfaction with the household and childcare task, the satisfaction with the equilibrium in paid working time between each partner, and marital satisfaction (Kalmuss et al., 1992; Ruble et al. 1988; Campione, 2008), while marital satisfaction seems not to have necessary a positive effect on fertility (Zimmermann & Easterlin 2006; Mencarini & Tanturri 2006). The satisfaction with the housework and childcare tasks is also linked to the concept of "fairness" of partners' sharing. For example, if the division of domestic labour is perceived as unfair by women, loss of marital quality and marital satisfaction becomes more probable (Coltrane, 2000), that also makes less probable the progression to a/another child.

The processes that are supposed to be working on the level of life satisfaction along the life cycle are well described (both theoretically and methodologically) by the literature on the "hedonic adaptation" model and its rethinking (Plagnol & Scott, 2010; Frijters et al., 2011; Angeles, 2010). Even if the idea of an "hedonic treadmill" is still under discussion, we know that life events impact on the changes of individual's satisfaction with life. First, changes may occur as the direct effect of experiencing a certain life event (e.g. the death of the partner decreases life satisfaction); second, changes may occur before the event (e.g. satisfaction with life increase before the arrival of a child);

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third, in a longer term opposite changes may occur after the reaction to the life event, tending to recover the level of satisfaction experienced before life event (e.g. after some years of widowhood life satisfaction tends to increase again). The last two processes can be defined as “anticipation” and “adjustment”. Some studies on fertility behaviours offer interesting evidences of these processes. For example, recent analysis confirms that people who have higher expected happiness from having a child are more likely to have one in the short term and that the additional happiness that parents anticipate from having a child facilitates childbearing decisions (Billari & Kohler, 2009). Moreover, its effect will depend on parity (Margolis & Myrskylä, 2011), simply because those who have already had children will learn from their experiences. In this sense the arrival of a first child (the transition to parenthood) is a unique event: the lack of similar experience makes more probable a wrong anticipation of the consequences of becoming parents. But what does it happen when the anticipated happiness does not matched with the real difficulties that new parents have to face? What some studies reveal is that unexpected difficulties tend to reduce marital satisfaction (Belsky et al., 1990) and create conflicts in the couple (Belsky 1988). But are unexpected difficulties related also to a reduction of the likelihood of the transition to the second child?

Hypotheses

H1: Facing unexpected difficulties in parenthood reduce in the long term the probability of experiencing a second pregnancy.

H2: Difficulties in adjustment in the family and work spheres reduce the likelihood of the partners' to proceed to a second pregnancy.

H3: Decreasing trend of marital satisfaction reduce the probability to experience a second pregnancy.

H4: Decreasing trend of fertility expectation reduce the probability to experience a second pregnancy.

The Australian case

Similarly to other Western countries, in the last 30 years Australia has seen large changes in its demographic characteristics as well as in the labour market. Female employment rate increased since the end of the 70s, followed by a strong decrease in the fertility rate (stagnating between 1.7 and 1.8² since the beginning of the 90s). The decline of fertility became a source of concern for the Australian government, and new family policies introduced between 1992 and 2006, and also after, until 2011, aimed openly to increase Australian couples' fertility. These policies have been based on economic benefits, directed to those families with young children with only one member employed and, as a consequence, favouring male-breadwinner family model. Some studies conducted on the social and demographical effects of this set of policies, reveals as indeed, far to increase Australian couples' fertility (Fan & Maitra 2010), they increased gender gap, penalized working mothers and decreased birthrate among young women (McDonald, 2000). As a consequence, these policies have been strongly criticized because representing a step back in terms of gender equality results. The Australian welfare system is considered generating problems of gender equality exactly after the transition to the first child. For this reason, the Australian context is an ideal one where investigating the “shock” that the birth of the first child produces on partners and the consequences on subsequent fertility expectations. In fact, the lack of policies supporting reconciliation between motherhood and working lead women to rethink their preferences and priorities in terms of job and family commitment. This generates a shift from quite egalitarian gender role-set of childless couples to a more traditional gender balance after the transition to parenthood.

² Source: Australian Bureau of Statistics (various years).

Data, sample and method

Using the first 9 waves of the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) panel survey (2001-2009) we select a sample of 276 couples (women aged no more than 44 years) that have been followed since the year of the pregnancy of the first child. Only couples of first-time parents have been selected, discarded those where at least one of the two partners experienced a divorce/separation or widowhood. Sample reduction passing time is caused by attrition and the experience of the second pregnancy. 119 couples (43%) experienced the transition to the second child. A time variable counts the years passing since the year of the pregnancy of the first child. At time 1 (year of the birth of the first child) 276 couples cover our sample. For time 1 to time 2 one year passes and 15 couples exit because experience the second pregnancy while 57 exit the survey (right censored). The last time period we consider in our analysis for the estimation of the probability of the occurrence of the second pregnancy is time 4. In time 5 only 25 couples remain in the sample, forcing to stop the analysis.

Figure 1. Description of the sample

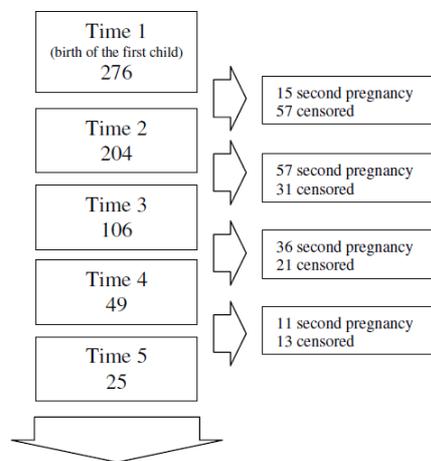


Table 1. Dependent variable and main predictors

Type of variable	Operationalization
<i>Dependent variable</i>	
Occurrence of the second pregnancy	Takes value 1 the year of the occurrence of the second pregnancy (otherwise 0)
<i>Main predictors</i>	
Unexpected difficulties	Being parent is harder than imagined, scale 1 (completely disagree) to 5 (completely agree)
Adjustment in family	Family time less enjoyable, scale 1 (completely agree) to 7 (completely agree)
	I do more than fair share in childcare, scale 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree)
	I do more than fair share in housework, scale 1 (completely disagree) to 7 (completely agree)
Adjustment in work	Work time less enjoyable, scale 1 (completely agree) to 7 (completely agree)
	I had to turn down work opportunities, scale 1 (completely agree) to 7 (completely agree)
	Satisfaction with my job, scale 0 (completely unsatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied)
Marital satisfaction	Satisfaction with the relationship with my partner, scale 0 (compl. unsatisfied) to 10 (compl. satisfied)
Fertility expectation	How likely to have a child/more children in the future? Scale 0 (very unlikely) to 10 (very likely)

From the first explorative analyses we found mixed effects of the predictors. Using Kaplan Mayer estimation, unexpected difficulties and decreasing fertility expectation are always linked to a lower probability of the transition to the second child for both women and men. On the contrary, the loss of marital satisfaction does not seem related to a lower propensity for having another child, while is the increase of marital satisfaction in the long term that seems to reduce the likelihood of a second pregnancy.

Event History Analysis

The risk of experience the transition to the second child has been estimated using logistic discrete time hazard model with time variant and time invariant predictors (Singer & Willet, 2003):

$$\text{Logit } h(t_{ij}) = \alpha_{nij} + \beta_n X_{ni} + \beta_n X_{nij}$$

All the predictors listed above are considered as time variant, while among the controllers we have both time variant (age, education, marital status, employment condition, etc.) and time invariant factors (sex, personality traits). Personality traits are no longer considered stable along the life course, but we can assume a sort of stability in the short term.

Even if the model still needs more work (maybe it will be changed into a piecewise constant exponential model) to take into account the complexity of the effect of the parameters in each time span, up to now some preliminary results can be discussed. For women the positive effect of marital satisfaction on the decision to have a second child seems to be linked with an easy and positive adjustment both in the work and the family spheres. More generally women tend to decrease their risk of having an additional child when they are facing unexpected difficulties in parenting. On men's side apparently the model gives little results: the risk of having a second child seems to be negatively affected just by unexpected difficulties and the perception of doing much more than the fair share of childcare.

Nevertheless, because of the small sample and as event history analysis is sensible to the introduction of different combination of covariates and their definitions, further developments of the models are going to be evaluated.

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