

That is easier said than done: Childbearing intentions and their realization in a short-term perspective

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Short abstract

This paper studies short-term fertility intentions of women and men and their subsequent behavior. On the one hand, the predictive strength of fertility intentions is of interest. On the other hand, the most important inhibiting or enabling determinants contributing to the realization of fertility intentions are analyzed. For that purpose, data of the first three waves of the German Family Panel (pairfam) are used. The theoretical model is derived from the Theory of Planned Behavior. Its validity for the realization of short-term childbearing intentions is tested in the low-fertility context of Germany. Our descriptive findings indicate a certain predictive strength of fertility intentions. Individuals with a strong desire to have a child within the next two years were most likely to do so. However, negative intentions are even more predictive for subsequent behavior. For women and men with positive fertility intentions, the chances to fail are relatively high. Multivariate results point to an overwhelming importance of stable relationships for having and realizing positive fertility intentions. Beyond that, financial security and parenthood status have a strong determining impact. With social pressure exerted by parents, subjective norms appear as an additional relevant factor for the realization of positive intentions.

Key words: Fertility intentions, Fertility behavior, Life events, Panel data, Theory of Planned Behavior, Germany

Extended abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate short-term fertility intentions of women and men and their subsequent behavior. The gap between childbearing intentions and actual behavior remains a contentious issue in demographic research as well as in policy debate. Against the background of low fertility in Germany, intentions are used as predictors for individuals' future childbearing. Research points out that at the aggregate level, family size intentions are on average higher than completed fertility (Goldstein et al. 2003; Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan 2003; Liefbroer 2009). Despite the undisputable fact that some births occur without prior positive intentions, the tendency that fertility behavior falls short of intentions seems to prevail in low-fertility settings. This is often attributed to unfavorable personal circumstances which interfered with initially formed intentions or more recently to changing intentions over the life course (Bachrach and Morgan 2013).

At the individual level, it is not well understood why some people realize their stated fertility intentions and others do not. So far research on this topic has been conducted for some European countries only, such as Hungary (Spéder and Kapitány 2009), Great Britain (Berrington 2004) and France (Toulemon and Testa 2005). The aim of this study is to build upon existing research by analyzing the intentions-behavior link using recently available longitudinal data for Germany. In so doing, we want to contribute to a better understanding of the decision making processes underlying fertility behavior.

Two central research questions are addressed in this study. First, to what extent do individuals of different social groups realize their stated positive or negative fertility intentions over a period of two years? Second, which are the most important inhibiting or enabling determinants contributing to the realization of short-term fertility intentions? In addition to demographic, ideational and socio-economic determinants, a particular emphasis is given to a potential impact of social pressure exerted by friends or parents. So far, the influence of social pressure has only been investigated with respect to childbearing intentions (Balbo and Mills 2011) but not regarding their realization. Another important

factor considered in our analyses is the stability of employment and of partnerships. To fully account for the intentions-behavior link, our analyses include the whole range of potential outcomes for women and men with positive, negative and uncertain intentions. In particular the last two groups have sometimes been neglected in empirical research on the realization of fertility intentions.

Our analyses refer to individuals' fertility intentions and subsequent behavior within a time frame of two years. The concept of fertility intentions differs from the desired, ideal or expected number of children (Iacovou and Tavares 2011). The shortness of a period of two years enables respondents to better anticipate their chances of realization than in the long run because they are better able to oversee this time frame (Ette and Ruckdeschel 2007). Thus, fertility intentions relate in particular to individuals' circumstances and perceptions (Thomson 2001: 5348) and it is relatively unlikely that intentions change within such a short time frame.

Our data are taken from the first three waves of the German Family Panel (pairfam) (Huinink et al. 2011) and its East German subsample DemoDiff (Kreyenfeld et al. 2012). Pairfam ("Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics") is a representative, multidisciplinary, longitudinal study for researching family dynamics in Germany. These data are particularly suited for our purpose because they allow us to compare fertility intentions in wave 1 with actual behavioral outcomes (pregnancies as well as births) two years later.

Our theoretical framework is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen 1991). According to this theory, behavior is influenced by three factors: attitudes towards the behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. Within the initial framework of the TPB, which is often used in the context of fertility research, subjective norms affect the intention to have a child only. Complementary, we argue that subjective norms, expressed as the perception of what relevant others approve or disapprove of (social pressure), can work in a direct way as an enabler or constraint to perform a certain behavior. This extension of the

original theoretical framework is expected to be useful for analyzing different stages of the fertility process more thoroughly. Our reasoning for extending the TPB is the assumption that an individuals' social network of family and friends not only influences fertility intentions but also decision-making. This line of thought follows Rossier and Bernardi (2009) who argue that social network mechanisms, such as social influence and social support, are crucial to understand the relationship between fertility intentions and outcomes. In that sense, positive attitudes of family and friends towards childbearing might have an enabling influence on the realization of fertility intentions.

With respect to our first research question, our findings confirm that short-term fertility intentions have a certain degree of predictive power for subsequent behavioral outcomes, particularly in case of negative intentions. It is not only the direction of intentions but also their strength and degree of certainty that matters for fertility behavior. Concerning the positive end of the intentions spectrum, it was shown that not even half of those with strong positive intentions were able to realize them within two years. This might indicate that conception is simply not as predictable as contraception is nowadays, that personal circumstances changed in a way that led to a postponement of fertility decisions or that short-term fertility intentions were adapted in relation to changes in the life course. With respect to our second research question, multivariate results point out that the single most important determinant for realizing a positive intention is a stable partnership. Thus, the lack of a partner as well as changes in the partnership biography are impediments to the realization of positive fertility intentions. In addition, a stable employment situation has a strong enabling impact as well, particularly for men. Regarding the influence of social pressure, our results suggest that social pressure exerted by parents and friends has an impact on the realization of positive intentions. The findings revealed that those who perceived social pressure were most likely to state positive fertility intentions and only for those with positive intentions the awareness of social pressure mattered for their realization. Insofar, the suggested extension of the TPB framework by including a direct impact of subjective norms on actual behavioral control seems promising for further research.

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