



Channels of social influence on the realization of short-term fertility intentions in Germany



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ABSTRACT

This paper studies the short-term fertility intentions of women and men and their subsequent behavior. Guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior, the intention-behavior link is analyzed using the first three waves of the German Family Panel (pairfam). The following research questions are addressed: To what extent do individuals realize their stated positive or negative fertility intentions over a period of two years, and what are the most important determinants that inhibit or enable the realization of short-term fertility intentions? Although women and men with a strong desire for a child, in particular parents, were most likely to have had a(nother) child, negative childbearing intentions were even more predictive. Social pressure exerted by parents or by friends appears to have had a stronger effect on the formation than on the realization of fertility intentions, while, surprisingly, expected social support did not have any noticeable effect. In addition, being in a stable relationship was by far the most important determinant of whether individuals had realized their positive fertility intentions.

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1. Introduction

The reasons for the gap between childbearing intentions and actual behavior continue to be debated in demographic research, as well as in policy discussions. Against the background of low fertility, as it has been the case in western Germany since the mid 1970s and in eastern Germany since the beginning of the 1990s, intentions are used as predictors of the future childbearing of individuals. Research has shown that at the aggregate level, the intended family size is on average higher than completed fertility (Goldstein, Lutz, & Testa, 2003; Quesnel-Vallée & Morgan, 2003; Liefbroer, 2009; Hartnett, 2014). While it is certainly the case that some births occur without prior plans, in low-fertility settings fertility behavior tends to fall short of intentions (Morgan & Rackin, 2010). The failure to have the intended number of children is often attributed to an individual's unfavorable personal circumstances, which may interfere with his or her initial childbearing intentions; or, more recently, to changing intentions over the life course (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013).

At the individual level, it is not well understood why some people realize their stated short-term fertility intentions, while others do not. Research on this topic has so far been conducted for only a few

European countries, such as Hungary (Spéder & Kapitány, 2009), Great Britain (Berrington, 2004), France (Toulemon & Testa, 2005), Norway (Dommermuth, Klobas, & Lappegård, 2015), and Italy (Mencarini, Vignoli, & Gottard, 2015). The aim of this study is to build upon existing research by analyzing the intention-behavior link using recently available longitudinal data for Germany. Two central research questions are addressed: First, to what extent do women and men realize their stated positive or negative fertility intentions over a period of two years? Second, what are the most important determinants that inhibit or enable the realization of short-term fertility intentions? We contribute to the current knowledge base in two important ways. We consider the intention-behavior link for women and men with both negative and positive fertility intentions, rather than focusing on the positive end of the intention spectrum only, as often the case in research (e.g., Kapitány & Spéder, 2012; Spéder & Kapitány, 2014, 2015; Dommermuth et al., 2015). In doing so, we fully account for the intention-behavior nexus and avoid potential selection bias (Balbo & Mills, 2011b). Our second contribution is the inclusion of additional explanatory variables that we consider to be important enabling or constraining factors for the realization of childbearing plans, such as stability in the partnership status and the financial situation. We are particularly interested in exploring the potential influence of social pressure exerted by friends or parents and of expected social support by significant others, as these variables have so far been largely neglected. Up to now, the influence of social pressure has been investigated with respect to the formation of childbearing intentions

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only (Balbo & Mills, 2011a; Klobas & Ajzen, 2015), while the effects of social pressure on the realization of those intentions have not been previously studied. The underlying assumption is that in a social context like Germany, in which informal childcare plays a considerable role (Ette & Ruckdeschel, 2007), levels of social pressure and expected social support might affect whether fertility plans are realized as intended. By disentangling the potential impact of perceived social pressure and expected social support, we hope to gain a better understanding of the decision-making processes that underlie fertility behavior.

Our analyses focus on the fertility intentions of individuals and their 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 & Tavares, 2011). Asking respondents whether they intend to have a child in the next two years is more specific than asking them about their long-term fertility plans, because they are better able to predict the likelihood that they will realize their intentions over a shorter than over a longer time period (Ette & Ruckdeschel, 2007). Fertility intentions are related to individuals' circumstances and perceptions (Thomson, 2001), and a narrower time frame reduces the possibility that the individuals' intentions and behavioral contexts will change or that unforeseen circumstances will intervene (Spéder & Kapitány, 2015).

We first present our theoretical framework, which is guided by the Theory of Planned Behavior, while giving particular consideration to the link between childbearing intentions and behavior. The formulation of our central hypotheses is followed by a review of the research on the link between short-term fertility intentions and actual childbearing, and on the factors that affect the realization of childbearing intentions. We then present our data and our analytic strategy. In the section that follows, we describe our results in relation to our central theoretical expectations. We close with a discussion of our findings and indicate some directions for future research.

2. Theoretical background

Our theoretical starting point is the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) (Ajzen, 1991). Although the TPB was designed as a content-free model of human social behavior (Ajzen, 2011), not as a model

of fertility behavior, it has been widely used to investigate the intention to have a child (Dommermuth, Klobas, & Lappegård, 2011; Dommermuth et al., 2015; Philipov & Bernardi, 2011; Balbo & Mills, 2011b). The link between fertility intentions and behavior can be interpreted in light of the TPB because the theory posits that behavior is a "reasoned action." Ajzen (2011: 68) argued that "for the most part, people try to be reasonable in their fertility decisions by considering the likely consequences of their behavior, taking into account the expectations of significant others and trying to anticipate possible obstacles." According to this theoretical framework (see Fig. 1), an individual's fertility behavior is based on the evaluation of three factors that affect the underlying intention: his or her personal attitudes toward having a child based on an evaluation of the perceived costs and benefits of parenthood, subjective norms regarding the desirability of having a child among the person's friends and family members, and the individual's level of perceived control over having a child. In addition, the person's fertility intentions depend on background factors that enable him or her to perform the intended behavior, such as personality, education, and cultural context (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005; Balbo & Mills, 2011b).

In this study, the behavior of interest is the birth or conception of a (further) child. Based on the theory, this behavior entails stopping the use of contraceptives and starting sexual intercourse (Billari, Philipov, & Testa, 2009; Philipov, 2011). Pregnancies and childbirths that result from this behavior can be used as approximations of the behavior (Ajzen, 2011). Fertility-related behaviors are preceded by corresponding intentions. While a pregnancy may initially be unintended, unplanned or mistimed, the individual's behavior leading up to becoming pregnant (e.g., unprotected sex) is considered intentional (Ajzen, 2011). Births from initially unintended pregnancies may occur for different reasons, for instance because of unobserved changes in intentions over time or because of pregnancies that resulted from behaviors without any conscious reasoning about fertility or because of situational forces leading up to a pregnancy that overcame initial intentions. A close link between intentions and behavior can therefore only be assumed if both are compatible (Fishbein & Ajzen, 2010).

As is shown in Fig. 1, perceived behavioral control has a direct impact on fertility intentions, and, in contrast to attitudes and

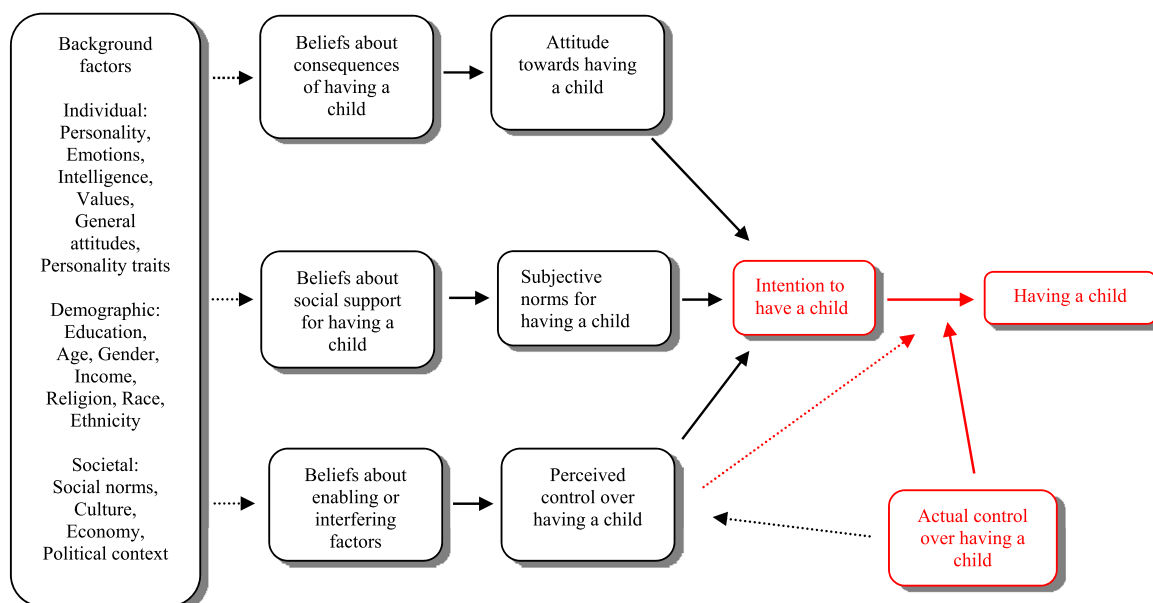


Fig. 1. The Theory of Planned Behavior Applied to Fertility Decisions. Source: Ajzen & Klobas (2013: 206), own accentuation.

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