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## Childbearing desires of childless men and women: When are goals adjusted?

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the concept of desired future fertility. Childbearing desires are often conceptualized in the literature as representing an individual's ideal future fertility where there are no constraints or obstacles to achieve the desired outcome. As such, childbearing desires, unlike fertility intentions, are thought to be relatively unaffected by changing life circumstances. Using a theoretically driven model incorporating goal adjustment, we test whether desires of childless men and women do in fact change over time. Using data from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey (2001–2010) we specifically investigate whether changing life circumstances do effect a change in childbearing desires. We find that age is strongly related to adjusting childbearing desires, as is relationship formation. Desires are however, not greatly influenced by short-term shocks such as an episode of poor health or unemployment, although these events have different effects for women and for men. Overall, the findings are consistent with psychological theories of goal adjustment, that is, individuals will revise their desires for having children if they perceive that their desires are not likely to be fulfilled.

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### 1. Introduction

As observed by Caldwell (1996), there has been increased interest in the use of survey data by demographers, and this interest has been particularly strong among those seeking to gain insight into the dynamics of fertility behaviour in low fertility countries. Survey data on individuals' fertility plans can be used to investigate how fertility decision making and individual agency operate at the micro level; elements which are easily lost when the focus is on the macro-level structural, demographic and social context in which fertility occurs (de Vaus, 2002; Schoen, Astone, Kim, Nathanson, & Fields, 1999). Two of the most commonly studied prospective fertility questions are those that ask respondents about their *desire* for children and questions that ask respondents about their *intentions* for future children.

Conceptually, the information derived from each of these two types of questions is distinct. Desires are thought to measure what a person wants, while intentions are assumed to also incorporate or take into account situational factors that may prevent someone from achieving those desires (Miller & Pasta, 1995). So it is generally understood that situational factors and perceived constraints affect people's intentions but not their desires for children, 'Desires represent what the individual himself or herself wants. They are wishes. . . Intentions are different from desires in that they incorporate, or at least take into account, the perceived desires of significant others, as well as other situational factors that prevent simply doing what one desires' (Miller & Pasta, 1995, p. 533).

In this paper we examine the assumption that desires are generally fixed; that is, that they do not respond to situational factors. Using psychological theories of goal adjustment, we analyse ten waves of data (2001–2010) from the Household, Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey to test whether life course events affect desires.

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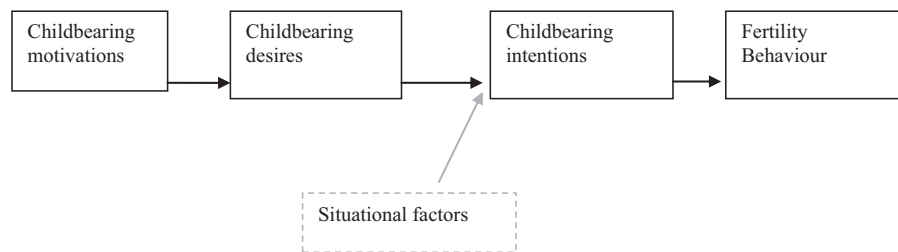


Fig. 1. The Traits-Desires-Intentions model.

Source: Simplified version of model adapted from Miller and Pasta (1995, p. 533).

## 2. Literature review

Recent demographic studies have used several different frameworks to help understand the fertility decision-making process (Langdridge, Sheeran, & Connolly, 2005). In the following section we outline the two major theories, the Theory of Planned Behaviour (Ajzen, 1991) and the Traits-Desires-Intentions model proposed by Miller and Pasta (1988, 1993, 1995). Despite their popularity, both these models are of limited use when it comes to examining childbearing desires, and in particular changes in childbearing desires over time. The former model focuses only on the concept of intentions, and does not provide any explicit mention of fertility desires. The latter model does include consideration of the role of fertility desires, however it proposes that desires are relatively stable over time and is therefore inadequate for understanding how and when desires for children may change.

Perhaps the most influential attitude-behaviour model in the current literature is the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB). While not developed specifically for looking at fertility decisions, the TPB has been used as a framework for examining the determinants of childbearing and child-timing intentions (Billari, Philipov, & Testa, 2009; Domermuth, Klobas, & Lappegård, 2011; Klobas, 2010), and of changes to fertility intentions over time (Iacovou & Tavares, 2011). The TPB posits that there are three determinants of intentions: attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control. The inclusion of perceived behavioural control has made the TPB particularly useful for looking at childbearing as this is a behaviour which individuals may not have control over. People may face a number of constraints including internal ones, for example relating to fecundity, or external ones such as the lack of a suitable partner (Schoen et al., 1999). However as Kodzi, Johnson, and Casterline (2010) have pointed out, the central focus of the TPB is on intentions, and there is no explicit mention made about how desires fit into the model.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the TPB the Traits-Desires-Intentions (TDI) models proposed by Miller and Pasta (1988, 1993, 1995) was developed specifically in relation to fertility. In the TDI, the link between fertility desires and fertility

intentions is explicitly outlined (Fig. 1). The starting point is an individual's underlying motivation towards childbearing. This motivation has biological origins but is also shaped by people's experiences (Miller & Pasta, 1993, 1995). Motivational disposition is mainly latent in the sense that it does not enter a person's consciousness or influence their behaviour (Miller & Pasta, 1993). However if the motivation does become 'activated' it is experienced as a desire for children. Intentions are then formed as a result of the integration of these desires with an appraisal of reality and of perceived situational constraints (Miller & Pasta, 1993, 1995). As Miller, Severy, and Pasta note 'the difference between desires and intentions is akin to the difference between what one would like to do given no situational constraints and what one actually plans to do given the reality within which one ordinarily operates' (2004, p. 194). In many ways the situational factors discussed by Miller and Pasta (1993, 1995) are similar to the perceived behavioural control component of the TPB. In both models people's perception of possible constraints will affect their intentions regarding childbearing.

In line with the above models, recent longitudinal studies of fertility intentions have found evidence that changes in situational factors and perceived behavioural control do have an influence on fertility intentions leading to both upwards and downwards revisions over time (Berrington, 2004; Hayford, 2009; Iacovou & Tavares, 2011; Liefbroer, 2009; Mitchell & Gray, 2007). These studies find that ageing and relationship transitions are particularly important factors in understanding changes to fertility intentions. Studies that examine change in intentions over time in response to changing situational factors fit well with the TPB and the TDI models. However, less is known about the pattern of change in desires over time. Do desires remain stable over the life course as proposed by the TDI model, with only intentions responding to changing circumstances, or are desires also affected by life experiences? Few studies have looked specifically at this issue (Heiland, Prskawetz, & Sanderson, 2008; Thomson, McDonald, & Bumpass, 1990; Wilson & Koo, 2006). We propose that desires may change as a result of life experiences, and this paper examines the change in desires over time with this in mind.

The studies that have considered whether desires change suggest that it is unlikely that childbearing desires remain unaffected by a person's experiences (Heiland et al., 2008). Holton et al. suggest that desires may be better thought of as 'childbearing ideals which have been

<sup>1</sup> To this end, Perugini and Bagozzi (2001) have suggested that the TPB could be modified by including desires in the framework, so that the antecedents directly affect desires, which in turn directly affect intentions.

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