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Is fertility contagious? Using panel data to disentangle mechanisms of social network influences on fertility decisions

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ABSTRACT

Using panel data ($N = 1,679$ married and cohabiting couples), this paper investigates the presence and causal mechanisms of social contagion processes regarding first births. Results confirmed the hypothesized positive association between the number of network members (friends, acquaintances, siblings) with young children and the respondents' transition rate into parenthood, particularly among younger couples. Several potential intervening mechanisms underlying this social contagion effect were tested. First, evidence was found for observational learning processes in which Ego obtained information on the joys and challenges of parenthood from network members with children. Second, childless respondents tended to feel pressured from couples with children in the network to start a family. Third, results supported the notion of social opportunity costs in that the anticipated loss of social ties after becoming a parent was more likely the fewer parents there were in the network. All three mechanisms exerted a positive impact on both fertility intentions and behavior. Panel regression models relying on intraindividual change scores showed that social learning was the most robust mechanism. An additional indirect test for causality suggested that the findings were unlikely to merely reflect parental status homophily (i.e., selection effects).

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1. Introduction

Most previous studies on fertility behavior have adopted an individualistic perspective, considering the childbearing decision as a function of individual characteristics while largely ignoring social influence from relevant others such as one's partner, relatives, and friends. There is a long tradition of research on more distal, social structural fertility determinants (for instance, in the economic literature, see [Easterlin, 1975](#)), but only comparatively recently have family scholars begun to include partner characteristics in their analyses on a regular basis ([Corijn, Liefbroer, & De Jong Gierveld, 1996](#); [Klein, 2003](#)).

Even fewer studies have explicitly analyzed social influences on ego's generative intentions and behavior, for instance, negotiation between partners ([Bauer and Kneip, 2013](#)) or influences exerted by friends, relatives, colleagues, and other significant others; important exceptions include the impact of social support ([Hank & Kreyenfeld, 2003](#)) and social pressure ([Fried & Udry, 1980](#); [Udry, 1982](#)) on childbearing decisions. Sociological definitions of social action ([Weber, 1978](#), p. 4) and social-ecological approaches (e.g., [Bronfenbrenner, 1977](#)) suggest that individuals act on the basis of expectations and anticipated reactions from their social environment. Applying this conceptualization to generative behavior may provide valuable new insights into collective behavioral shifts, for instance, both during the historical period of "baby boom" and in the subsequent emergence of low-fertility regimes in Europe ([Kohler, Billari, & Ortega, 2002](#)) or when little baby booms occur within friendship networks, as many friends and acquaintances happen to bear children at about

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the same time. Specifically, novel demographic behaviors (e.g., regarding family patterns or birth timing), can be assumed to spread from a few early adopters to an increasing number of individuals in a social aggregate, being part of a social diffusion process (Coleman, Katz, & Menzel, 1966). However, understanding how structural fertility factors are augmented by relational processes in determining what seem to be quite private decisions also requires augmenting conventional theoretical reasoning with arguments on microsocial interaction and social learning processes.

The present study pursues two major goals. First, we review previous evidence and present longitudinal descriptive findings in support of the assertion that there are social diffusion processes leading to the spread of fertility behavior within networks. Second, we elaborate on existing research by testing different mechanisms behind this phenomenon using a confirmatory, explanatory framework that also addresses issues of causal inference.

1.1. Types of social context effects on fertility behavior

By thinking about context effects, one is encouraged to take a broad view of the impact of social environments on generative behavior. Two main types of contexts are relevant: temporal–spatial and social. Each is based on different theoretical and analytical approaches, reviewed in detail below. Note that whereas spatial contexts may be illuminated by means of macro-level or comparative research, the study of social contexts requires the consideration of interpersonal communication processes.

On the macro level, fertility-related context effects imply a diffusion process in which an “innovation” (e.g., the salience of certain family-related values or acceptance of modern contraceptives) becomes increasingly prevalent in a population, leading to regional (or historical) “fertility regimes.” For instance, it has been hypothesized that demographic changes occurring during the First and Second Demographic Transitions (Lesthaeghe & Neels, 2002; van de Kaa, 1987) cannot be explained solely by shifting socioeconomic opportunities and incentives; rather, it can be assumed that they are often accelerated by accompanying collective learning processes based on personal interaction (Kohler, 2000). Kohler (2001; Kohler et al., 2002) analyzed time-series data from 1930 to 1995 of net reproduction rates among 13 countries. He found a common pattern by which phases of high fertility regimes are frequently followed by a relatively persistent low-fertility regime. The authors interpreted their findings as supporting the existence of stable equilibria between desired and realized fertility in diverse societies. Despite the insights that can be gained on the grounds of such macro-level studies, an ego-centered microsocial perspective that draws on individual-level data is needed to capture the dynamics by which diffusion processes unfold.

Accordingly, in another approach, individual fertility behavior is related to relevant characteristics of the respective socio-spatial context, for instance, to birth rates within specific local communities. Although this approach represents an important extension of macro-level studies because its reliance on individual-level data helps to avoid

causal misinterpretations (i.e., the “ecological fallacy”), corresponding studies have mostly failed to substantiate the hypothesized context effects. Applying a multilevel framework to German survey data, Hank (2002, 2003) found no effect of the community-level crude fertility rate on women’s transition rate to first and second births in the period 1984 through 1999. Hence, the mere geographic location of respondents in regions with low or higher fertility did not seem to clearly predict their own childbearing decisions. This is not surprising given that social influence is based on personal interaction; as Burt (1987, p. 1288) stated: “At the heart of social contagion is the interpersonal synapse over which innovation is transmitted.” Hence, an adequate research design must include the microsocial, relational context in which individuals are embedded.

It is therefore promising to adopt a social network perspective (Scott, 1996) in order to examine processes of fertility-related social contagion processes. Before we review previous findings and turn to the specific mechanisms by which contexts may influence individuals’ fertility decisions, we first provide a definition of fertility-related social contagion as a temporal synchronization of generative behaviors among network members, net of co-occurrences owing to the sociodemographic homogeneity that is typically found within networks; this spread of novel (at least within the studied context) behaviors or attitudes is supposed to be driven by processes of mutual social influence (Burt, 1987; for a contrasting narrower definition, see Keim, 2011, pp. 175, 184). On the individual level, contagion implies the adoption of behavior that has not been exhibited previously and thus entails behavioral change. Social contagion of demographic innovations within networks has traditionally been studied regarding the acceptance and the use of contraceptives in non-Western developing countries (Bühler & Kohler, 2004; Montgomery & Casterline, 1996).

Few previous studies have focused directly on fertility intentions and behavior. In the studies that were based on ego-centered network data, the *potential* for social contagion was usually measured by the proportion of network members with children.

Previous evidence suggests that social contagion concerning birth events exists, although the mechanisms underlying this phenomenon are not entirely clear yet. Highly relevant is a study by Richter, Lois, Arránz Becker, and Kopp (2012) based on data from the first three waves of the German Family Panel, pairfam. In the pairfam study, name generators were used to collect ego-centered network data. The authors found a significant positive effect of the proportion of network members with children under three years of age on respondents’ subsequent transition to second births; the effect on first births was positive but nonsignificant, probably because of the limited number of birth events ($n = 93$). In a cross-sectional study based on a Polish survey comprising ego-centered network data (Bühler & Fraczak, 2007), the authors found a nonlinear, inversely u-shaped association, according to which ego’s childbearing intention increased with the share of parents with one or two children in the network was but declined again if there were more parents with

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