

The Predictability of Fertility Intentions for Subsequent Fertility Behavior in a Lowest-Low Fertility Context

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1. Theoretical background

Fertility intentions and subsequent fertility behavior are priority themes among lowest-low fertility countries in the Western world. Profound social and economic change including the latest economic recession fuelled a climate of uncertainty and risk (Sobotka, Skirbekk, & Philipov, 2011). Given these developments, researchers have been increasingly interested in what characterizes families with the long-term and irreversible plan to have a child, and what distinguished those who succeed in realizing this plan from those who do not.

The demographic literature suggests employment to be one key determinant of fertility intentions and subsequent fertility behavior, where employment status and socioeconomic characteristics (SES) indicate more or less favorable economic ‘fertility conditions’ (Kreyenfeld, Andersson, & Pailhé, 2012). Some scholars suggest that employed women are more likely to intend to have a child and realize their intentions sooner compared to those unemployed. Not all empirical findings confirm this argument, because analyses vary considerably depending on which indicators of employment are included, whether women or couples are studied, which parity transition is included, and which country is considered (for contrasting examples see e.g., Begall & Mills, 2011; Billari, Philipov, & Testa, 2009; Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005; Gebel & Giesecke, 2009; Golsch, 2003; Neyer, Lappegård, & Vignoli, 2013; Schmitt, 2012; Sobotka & Zeman, 2011).

From a *micro-economic* perspective, if we focus on employment status—and leave out other characteristics for now—employment is an indicator of the value of his or her time, then unemployment will reduce the price of time required for childcare. Ignoring the income effects a moment, job loss should therefore have a positive effect on the transition to parenthood due to the reduced opportunity costs of the unemployed partner who can specialize in the caregiver role. However, there are practical and normative limits on the extent to which fathers can and are ready to take on a larger share of parental duties, and some responsibilities can only be carried out by the mother (Dribe & Stanfors, 2009). Childbearing often requires at least a temporary absence of the mother from the labor market. However, if she is the sole income-earner, her temporary exit from the labor market will conflict with the need to maintain the family. Hence, in the case of unemployment women face reduced opportunity costs of parenthood, while this effect is of subordinate relevance for men (and single earner women).

Alternatively, *resource* and *bargain theories* (Blood & Wolfe, 1960) focus on how ‘extra-familial’ assets and resources influence the *power-balance within the couple*. As a result of the asymmetric distribution of resources between men and women in the labor market, men may have a distinctive power advantage and are eventually able to impose individual preferences on the partner. Vignoli et al. (2012), using Italian data, have empirically substantiated this argument. However, in countries where male breadwinner norms are still dominant as described by Levy and Krüger (2006) it is to question whether the social impacts of paternal employment status and SES characteristics matter *relatively* or *irrespectively* to those of their partner. Then family bargain can be located somewhere between Jansen and Liefbroer’s ‘power rule’ (Jansen & Liefbroer, 2006) and the Krüger and Levy’s ‘master status’ (Krüger & Levy, 2001), which suggests that men keep their master status in the professional field no matter how high their income is or whether they are actually employed.

Moreover, whether and to what extent a *male partner's attitude* about starting a family will matter then also depends on the given power-balance within the couple. For instance, might a men's attitude to have a child matter significantly for having a child despite he has a lower income than his female partner. Do we expect couples in male-dominated societies to behave in such way, or, do they decide as equal partners? By looking at employment status, SES characteristics, and partner fertility intentions, we should observe for the power-balance argument to be true one or more of the following three implications at micro-level:

- (i) Total income affects fertility intentions and subsequent fertility behavior, no matter from which partner the income comes (*cooperative* couples)
- (ii) Fertility intentions and subsequent fertility behavior are determined by the partner with the higher income (*competitive* couples)
- (iii) Neither total nor relative income matters, but his (lower) income dominates (*hegemonic* couples)

Cooperative couples (i) comply with *micro-economic theories* of the family (Becker, 1981), *competitive* couples (ii) follow an *atomistic* strategy of utility maximization, and *hegemonic* couples (iii) follow a prevailing (irrational) power rule.

2. The Swiss Case

We will test our hypotheses (i), (ii), and (iii) by using the most outstanding country case in terms of *lowest-low fertility* and *gender inequality*: Switzerland. This country has a long history of remarkably low *fertility* that distinguishes it from other countries in the European region and the United States. It experienced an earlier and stronger fall in fertility rates after 1964 and fertility rates remained at similar low levels since the mid-1970s. With a current TFR of 1.5 it is still ranking below the EU-27 average of 1.6. Low fertility in Switzerland is largely related to postponement and a high level of childlessness. With childlessness above 20% among women past reproductive age, Switzerland ranges among those countries with the highest global childlessness rates (Sobotka & Zeman, 2011). In some European countries later timing of first births is compensated by an acceleration in subsequent childbearing from the point of entry into motherhood. But acceleration in subsequent births appears not to set off the postponement effect in Switzerland, where substantially fewer women transition to the second birth compared to women in Northern Europe or the United States (Pettit & Hook, 2009). Deferring childbearing leaves less time for subsequent births (Berrington, 2004)—referred to in the literature as the tempo-quantum interaction. Impaired fecundity may be one reason and is associated with biological ageing and the fact that some women may not explicitly chose not to have a child but may end up childless anyway.

Complementing the tempo-quantum argument, several scholars pointed to the multiple fertility effects the economic recession had. Switzerland, however, has remained astonishingly resilient to the impact of the latest financial crisis in 2008. A more plausible explanation for Switzerland's fertility level offers Caldwell (2008) who describes Switzerland as a 'third fertility compromise' context, where a hardly bearable compromise between work and family has produced remarkably stable low fertility rates. Because *gender inequality* is still very high, women carry the main care burden while having similar (though not equal) access to the labor market. Reconciling work and family often forces them to temporarily opt out of the labor market after childbirth and into a gender-specific division of paid and unpaid work. Thus, we expect provocatively to find that the couple organization of work in Switzerland renders male partners relatively more powerful in sustaining their family, and in making childbearing decisions. If we observe *competitive* or *cooperative* forms of couple organization to impact birth timing, this would provide tentative evidence that gender equality has entered families in originally male-dominated national contexts.

Two more reasons for our country selection are: First, Switzerland is a wealthy country with the *lowest unemployment rate in Europe*. This by and large rules out the economic necessity argument, which generally might exist among cooperative couples. A second reason for our country selection is the availability of *high-quality panel data* covering 11 waves. We use the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) that includes monthly information on births and detailed employment data. Almost unique if we look at other household panel data sets, the SHP contains information on short-term fertility intentions asked in each wave starting from 2002 (SHP, 2010, see Voorpostel, et al., 2009). The Swiss Household Panel (SHP) for 2002-2012 is conducted by the Swiss Centre of Expertise in the Social Sciences (FORS) (University of Lausanne; see <http://www.swisspanel.ch> for a description of the data set).

3. Research strategy and methods

In this paper we explore the characteristics of women and couples and (1) differentiate those who want a child from those who do not and (2) differentiate among those who want a child, between those who are successful and those who are not in having a child. In this context we are focusing on the male-female power balance. Do Swiss couples behave as we would expect in male breadwinner oriented societies? Or, do they decide as equal partners? We will look at employment status and SES characteristics as well as revealed fertility intentions.

Step 1. Identify determinants of fertility intentions. We included women of reproductive age, matched them to their partners, and estimate a set of *logistic regressions* for determinants associated with women's intention to have a child within 24 months (fertility intentions have been described as antecedents of subsequent fertility behavior (see e.g. Schoen, Kim, Nathanson, & Fields, 1999; Westoff & Ryder, 1977). Being located between ideal fertility and childbearing, they were shown to correlate positively with the subsequent childbearing behavior at individual level (Ajzen, 1991; Miller & Pasta, 1995). The shorter the time interval between the intention formation and realization (2-3 years), the more correspond intentions with actual fertility behavior (Schoen, et al., 1999). Treating fertility intentions as antecedents of behavior has become common with the advent of Ajzen's theory of planned behavior (TPB) to analyze fertility (Billari, et al., 2009).

Step 2. Estimate waiting time to birth after the observed positive intent. We follow up on women's first observed positive intent and obtain a sub-sample of 731 women who were observed to "intend to have a child within the next 24 months" matched with 570 male partners (since the sample is household based, it is not possible to distinguish among 161 women between those whose partners do not coreside and those who do not have partners at the time they report intending to have a child). We control for parity and Swiss nationality and focus on economic variables and correspondence between the partner's intention toward having a child. The Cox Regression framework allows us to use more of the information that is embedded in the SHP. While our interest is primarily in the differences between women who successfully convert their intentions to have a child into a birth and those who do not, what we observe are durations of varying length over which women of differing age and situations either do or do not give birth.

4. References

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