

## **The influence of life events on the short-term stability of fertility intentions – an analysis with the first two waves of the German Family Panel**

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The aim of this paper is to investigate the short-term stability or instability of fertility intentions. We will focus on the effects of positive and negative life events, i.e. changes in the partnership and employment status.

Fertility intentions are regarded as a good predictor for subsequent fertility behavior and births. While the determinants of fertility intentions have often been analyzed based on cross sectional data, so far little research has been conducted about the reasons why people change their fertility intentions or keep them stable over the life course (Hayford 2009, Liefbroer 2009, Iacovou/Tavares 2011). For Germany there exists only a study by Heiland et al. (2008) which covers only women from western Germany. The studies show that life events may affect the stability of fertility intentions. However, they have several shortcomings. With the exception of Iacovou/Tavares (2011) they do not differentiate between stability, reduction and increase of intentions. Moreover, the studies do not account for the fact that people who do not intend to have children at the beginning of the observation period or are insecure may have different stability patterns than those who expect to have at least one child. In this study we want to overcome these shortcomings and provide a more sophisticated analysis of the short-term stability of fertility intentions in Germany.

Our theoretical framework is the “Theory of planned behaviour” (Ajzen 1991). According to this theory changes in fertility intentions may be the result of three factors: Attitudes toward the behavior, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. Unexpected life events may change the perceived costs and benefits of having children and thus result in an upward or downward revision of intention. Thus, we expect on the one hand that “positive” life events like having a new partner will reduce the stability of fertility intentions via increasing them. On the other hand we expect that “negative” life events like the loss of a job or a separation will result in a reduction of fertility intentions.

Our data comes from the first two waves of the new German Family Panel (pairfam) (Huinink et al. 2011). Pairfam (“Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics”) is a representative, multidisciplinary, longitudinal study for researching partner and family dynamics in Germany. The study began with its first wave in 2008 and will run up to 14 years. Interview data are being gathered from a nationwide random sample of anchor persons of the three birth cohorts (1971-73, 1981-83 and 1991-93). The first wave was collected in 2008/2009 (N=12,402), the second wave in 2009/2010 (N=9,069). Our analysis is restricted to heterosexual, fertile respondents with and without a partner who are childless and not pregnant in wave 1 (N=4,579). Intentions are measured with the concept of the “realistically expected number of children”. The question reads as follows: “When you think realistically about having (additional) children, how many (more) children do you think you will have?” The categories given to answer are: no child, one child, two children, three children, four and more children, I am not sure, I haven’t thought about that. This concept takes into account the current living conditions like having a partner or being in employment as well as biological preconditions to have children. Therefore, this concept offers a better chance to observe upward or downward adaptations of intentions over a period of only one year than, e.g. the desire for children or the ideal family size, which are expected to be more stable over the life course.

To analyze why people change their fertility intentions over time we use multinomial regression models. We differentiate between stability, reduction and increase of fertility intentions. Our main independent variables are change of partnership status (no partner in wave 1 & 2, partner in wave 1 & 2, loss of partner in wave 2, new partner in wave 2) and change of employment status (employed in wave 1 & 2, unemployed in wave 1 & 2, loss of job in wave 2, new job in wave 2). We further control for age, gender, region (east vs. west Germany), education and birth of a first child in wave 2. We run models for all respondents and separate models for people who have no intention in wave 1 or are insecure about the expected number of children.

Our findings confirm that fertility intentions are rather unstable over time. One third of male and female individuals in our sample do change their fertility intentions over

the short-term period of one year. Our second main result is that family life events obviously have a greater influence on the stability or instability of fertility intentions than changes in employment status. In accordance with our hypotheses respondents without a partner in wave 1 and 2 and those who have separated since wave 1 have a higher chance of reducing their fertility intention than women and men with a partner. This can be explained by the fact that having a partner is one of the most important prerequisites for realizing child bearing intentions. On the other hand, unemployment does not lead to a significant reduction of fertility intentions. The reason for this unexpected result may be that due to the payment of unemployment benefits in Germany unemployment does not cause financial stress immediately. Thus, one year of observation may be not enough to find effects of unemployment on fertility intentions. The third important finding is that the effects of the independent variables differ according to the value of the intention variable in wave 1. Having a new partner increases the intention especially if respondents do not intend to have children in wave 1 or if they report to be insecure about their fertility intention. This could give direction to future research on the stability of fertility intentions.

## References:

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