

Biographical risks and their impact on uncertainty in fertility intentions: A life course perspective based on the German Family Panel

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Short Abstract

Uncertainty is a central part of the fertility process. Individuals can be unsure about having children at all, about the number of desired or expected children, and about the timing of first or subsequent births, respectively. While there has been done a lot of research on the determinants of intentions and desires to have children, only few studies have explicitly dealt with uncertainty of fertility plans.

The aim of our paper is to extend the knowledge about the effects of life events and biographical insecurity on uncertainty in fertility intentions. Our expectations are theoretically based on Life Course Theory and the Theory of Planned Behaviour. First, we assume that separation from a partner increases uncertainty since behaviour control is decreased. Second, we expect an increase in uncertainty when individuals become unemployed, because this reduces financial security and thus behaviour control. Third, we hypothesize that the birth of the first child increases uncertainty regarding further births because parenting is a new experience and competes with other domains (work, hobbies) of the life course. According to all hypotheses we assume different effects for women and men.

We use data from waves 1-6 of the German Family Panel (pairfam) and apply fixed effects models and logistic regression. Our findings confirm that uncertainty in fertility intentions is of relevant prevalence in our sample and is not stable over the life course. In accordance with our hypotheses uncertainty is connected with changes in partnership, employment status, and parity of children. Furthermore, gender specific differences emerge.

Keywords: Fertility, Uncertainty, Biographical risks, Partnership status, Employment status, Parity

Extended Abstract

Fertility analyses have been a central topic within the field of demography. During the last decades analyses of fertility desires, expectations and intentions play a central role for explaining fertility behavior, especially in the context of low fertility countries. In low fertility countries the desired fertility is on individual and aggregate level generally higher than actual fertility (Goldstein et al. 2003). Fertility intentions are conceptualized as a mediator between fertility desires and fertility behavior and thus are of special interest in long-term studies (e.g. Liefbroer 2009). In addition, uncertainty is a central part of the fertility process (Morgan 1981, 1982). While there are large numbers of studies on determinants and the realization of fertility desires or intentions, less research has been done on the issue of uncertainty, even if studies about uncertain fertility intentions can be found in the beginning of the 1980s (e.g. Morgan 1981, 1982). These elder studies already give some evidence of uncertainty in fertility intentions as a determinant of fertility outcomes (e.g. Morgan 1981; Schaeffer & Thomson 1992).

This paper is grounded on studies which perceive fertility intentions as relevant for understanding the evolution of fertility trends (e.g. Hayford 2009; Liefbroer 2009). With this in mind we address two central research questions regarding the role of biographical risks for uncertainty in fertility intentions: On the one hand, what is the prevalence of uncertainty in fertility intentions when considering closer or wider concepts of uncertainty? And on the other hand, which biographical risks lead to a change from certain (positive) intentions to uncertainty and vice versa?

Our analysis contributes to previous research about uncertain fertility intentions in different ways: Besides analyzing the prevalence of uncertainty in fertility intentions, our research shed light on the stability of uncertainty across the life course. With the life course perspective in mind, we pay attention to the determinants partnership status, employment, and parity, which may lead to stability or change of (un-)certainty. However, we include not only partnership and employment status; more precisely we observe changes like losing a partner, becoming unemployed or pass through the transition to the birth of a (further) child. Our general hypothesis is that uncertainty in fertility intentions is influenced by changes of living conditions across the life course.

Our expectations are theoretically based on Life Course Theory and the Theory of Planned Behavior. The Life Course Theory (Elder 1994) focuses on changes in individuals' lives across time. A central aspect of the life course is the interdependence of life domains. Based on this perspective, biographical risky events like the separation from a partner or becoming unemployed could lead to a change from certain (and positive) to uncertain fertility intentions, because of perceived or real consequences for having children. We extend our

theoretical framework by the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen 1991). According to this theory, intentions as a precursor of behavior are influenced by three factors: attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control. In particular, we focus on the link between perceived behavior control and the evolution of uncertainty in fertility intentions. It can be assumed that a reduction of perceived behaviour control of an individual is followed by forming uncertainty in fertility intentions. First, we expect to see a change from certain to uncertain intentions when separation from a partner can be observed, since this reduces individuals' behavioural control of realizing the intention to have a (further). Since men are dependent on females for realizing parenthood intentions, this effect should be more pronounced for males. Second, we expect to see a change from certain to uncertain fertility intentions when individuals becoming unemployed. Unemployment reduces individuals' behavioural control regarding financial security what is generally seen as a prerequisite of fulfilling positive fertility intentions. Since the male breadwinner model is still relevant in the specific context of Germany, we expect a more pronounced effect for males than for females regarding the influence of becoming unemployed. Our third and last hypotheses focus on parity. We expect that especially the birth of a first child leads to uncertainty in fertility intentions since this transition is characterised by large changes in all life domains and new parents have no experiences with these changes before. In the country specific context of Germany women are mainly responsible for child care, and thus their life domains are more affected by the birth of a child than the life domains of men are. Keeping this in mind, we expect to see a more pronounced effect regarding uncertainty in fertility intentions by the birth of a first child for women than for men.

To test these hypotheses, we take data from waves 1-6 of the German Family Panel (Huinink et al. 2011). The German Family Panel is a representative, multidisciplinary, longitudinal study for researching family dynamics in Germany. These data are particularly suited for our purpose because they allow us to analyze uncertainty in fertility intentions across an observation period of 5 years. We apply fixed effects models to analyze if a change in partnership status, labor force status and parity lead to a change from certain to uncertain fertility intentions. Furthermore, we apply logistic regression to test if time constant variables determine uncertainty in fertility intentions.

Our preliminary findings confirm that uncertainty in fertility intentions is of relevant prevalence in our sample and is not stable over the life course. In accordance with our hypotheses a change from certain to uncertain fertility intentions is connected with changes in partnership status, employment status, and parity. Furthermore, gender specific differences emerge.

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