

Extended abstract:

The link between childbearing and marriage has weakened considerably over the last few decades. Although the numbers of children born outside of marriage are rising, these children are rather being born to cohabiting parents than to single-mothers. Cohabitation became a prevalent and increasingly stable form of partnership (Mayer, Schulze 2013), high divorce rates suggest the opposite trend in the stability of marriages.

The birth of a child is supposed to have a positive effect on partnership and family stability. Previous research shows that birth of a common child positively affects the stability of marital unions (Steele et al. 2005). For births within cohabitation, however, the results are rather mixed, and the stability of cohabiting families is highly dependent on local circumstances and varies greatly across countries (Heuveline, Timberlake 2004).

Getting married and having a family is often part of one decision (Billari, Kohler 2000). Whereas married partners may expect to become parents eventually, for cohabiters the pregnancy and subsequent birth might instead represent a situation that must be coped with. Some 40 % of children born to cohabiting mothers are “mistimed” (Kravdal 1997), or even unwanted (Musick 2002). Taking the couple perspective into account, children can be unplanned/unwanted by one or both parents. Mutually planned children become a specific capital of the couple (Manning 2004), whereas those born despite of the original intentions of one or both parents represent a stress factor. The discrepancy between fertility plans, real fertility outcomes, and their timing might thus shape the trajectories and stability of partnerships and families.

This paper focuses on couple’s disagreement in fertility plans, subsequent fertility, and the consequences of the discrepancies between fertility plans and outcomes. It targets the implications of experiencing (un)planned birth for the dynamics of various family forms, comparing stability of cohabiting and married couples.

Using data from first six waves (2008-2014) of the Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics - PAIRFAM (Huinink et al 2011), longitudinal study of partnership and family dynamics of three German birth cohorts (1971-73, 1981-83, 1991-93), this research offers an unique view of the demographic behavior of couples and families within the context of ongoing family change in former East- and West-Germany. PAIRFAM (among the few current surveys) offers multi-disciplinary data on respondents, their partners and whole families and facilitate the researchers' efforts to understand the very working and dynamics of modern family forms.

Discrete-time event-history analysis approach is employed. Based on the dataset modified into couple-months, the model is equivalent to logistic regression with the family dissolution as dependent variable. Information about couple's (dis)agreement in fertility plans from a wave preceding the birth is used to construct the indicator of (un)planned status of the child (three categories: mutually planned child, unplanned by one parent, unplanned by both parents). Families enter the analysis at the time of the birth of a child, and are observed until the event of dissolution. Couples who don't experience the event are censored at the time of the last observation in the sixth wave. Several models are estimated to assess the effects of socio-demographic and economic characteristics of families, such as relative educational position of partners (educational homogamy), age homogamy, relative position in labor force participation, or household income, and regional differences in East- and West-Germany.

The context of contemporary Germany represents an interesting case for the research on stability of various family settings. Despite the observed convergence in crude demographic indicators (Goldstein, Kreyenfeld 2011), twenty-five years after reunification former East- and West-Germany persistently differ in patterns of family- and childbearing-related behaviors. Our study explores whether the east-west divide holds for couples experiencing an unwanted birth as well.

The results suggest that the unplanned status of children destabilizes parents' partnership and increases the risk of family dissolution. The adverse effect of children unplanned by one and both parents is present in both married and cohabiting families, although married parents are more successful in coping with the given situation compared with cohabiters.

Adoption of the couple perspective allowed for a more precise construction of child's unwanted status. Most of the births described as unplanned in this study were unplanned by the partner who has little control over the use of contraceptives. The vast majority of disagreeing couples were those with male partners that had negative fertility plans.

Instead of the refusal of children, the unplanned status rather depicts a situation of birth that occurred too early in one's life. Especially for cohabiting couples, the birth of an unplanned child might have triggered family and other life transitions that would have had not happened otherwise. The key findings of the present paper show the fundamental implications the unwanted status of children has on the stability of various types of family settings.

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