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Fertility Intentions and Outcomes: The Role of Policies to Close the Gap

Intentions de fécondité et fécondité observée: Rôle des politiques publiques dans la réduction du décalage

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Abstract The articles in this special issue report about research carried out in a project with the same title as this introductory article (acronym FERTINT). This introduction starts with a brief description of the "fertility gap". It outlines its deficiencies when used for policy implications and the advantages of using fertility intentions. It also summarises the broad scope of issues related to intentions as presented in the articles: life-time and short-time fertility intentions and their realisation or frustration, the effect of uncertainty on intentions, the relevance of the theories of planned behaviour and fertility preferences and of social networks for studying couples' and competing intentions.

Keywords Fertility intentions · Realization of fertility intentions · Fertility gap

Résumé Les articles de ce numéro spécial rendent compte de recherches menées dans le cadre d'un projet ayant le même intitulé que cet article introductif (avec pour acronyme FERTINT). L'introduction débute par une brève description du "décalage de fécondité". L'inadaptation de cet indicateur pour la mise en place des politiques publiques est souligné, de même que le sont les avantages liés à l'utilisation des intentions de fécondité. L'introduction résume l'étendue des problématiques présentées dans les articles: les intentions au cours de la vie ou à court terme, réalisées ou pas, l'effet de l'incertitude sur les intentions, la pertinence des théories de planification du comportement par rapport aux préférences pour la fécondité, et celle des réseaux sociaux pour l'étude des couples et des intentions concurrentes.

Mots-clés Intentions de fécondité · Réalisation des intentions de fécondité · Décalage de fécondité

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1 From the Fertility Gap to Fertility Intentions

Contemporary low levels of fertility raise the question of whether behaviour adequately reflects people's preferences for the number of children they would like to have. Specifically, some people may want to have more children than they actually have but for some reasons are unable to fulfil their desires. Chesnais (1999) used the term "fertility gap" to describe the large difference between the observed fertility rate and the desired number of children. He also pointed out that the latter can be addressed as "latent demand for family polices" (p. 133). Coleman (1996) discussed the matter in a European perspective. The interest in the topic increased considerably after the findings of Goldstein et al. (2003) who showed that the ideal number of children in Europe, albeit on the decline during the last decades, remains considerably higher than actual fertility. These and other authors unanimously agree that if the desired family size, whether measured with the ideal or expected number of children, were fulfilled, fertility would rise considerably to levels close to or around replacement level; hence, the gap reflects the existence of unrealised fertility. Goldstein et al. (2003) also underlined the policy relevance of the fertility gap; subsequently other researchers supported this view. The "latent" demand for policies designed to support individuals and couples wishing to have their desired number of children has turned into an overt one, as witnessed by documents issued by European governmental bodies. For example, the *Green Paper* (EC 2005, p. 5) states: "*Surveys have revealed the gap which exists between the number of children Europeans would like (2.3) and the number that they actually have (1.5). This means that, if appropriate mechanisms existed to allow couples to have the number of children they want, the fertility rate could rise overall…*". The European Parliament's resolution for the demographic future of Europe, adopted in February 2008, includes a similar statement: "*[The European Parliament] … 4. Stresses that the average birth rate in the European Union, which at 1.5 is abnormally low, is not a reflection of women's choice or of European citizens' actual aspirations for creating a family…*"

The fertility gap, where it exists, is taken to indicate the existence of a window of opportunities for policy action. This reasoning raises a diversity of problems. Lutz (2007) reports that the gap measured as the difference between the ideal number of children and the adjusted TFR is considerably lower than the one measured with the conventional TFR. Another problem with this measurement is the use of the ideal number of children. The ideal number of children is usually interpreted as the number of children an individual would like to have under ideal conditions of life. However, "ideal" conditions of life can hardly be satisfied, i.e. as an indicator to measure the extent of policy needs, the ideal number of children can be seen as biased upwards (see Philipov et al. 2009, for a discussion).

Probably the most important problem in the use of the gap for policy implications is ecological fallacy. The fertility gap is measured at the macro level, while policies act at the micro-level, being directed towards individuals and couples who might experience frustrated fertility desires. Lutz (2007, Table 1) found a gap of only 0.06 for Austria: does this mean that Austrians manage to fulfil their fertility desires and there is no need of relevant policy support? The largest gap in the estimates

provided by Lutz was found for Finland: 0.76. Does this mean that the celebrated welfare regime in that country is unable to support the realisation of couples' fertility desires? Or does it mean that the government should enforce family policies? These questions show that the fertility gap has a limited application for policy implications; moreover it can be misleading in the measurement of unrealised fertility (Lutz 2007).

One opportune effect of the fertility gap debate is the increased attention paid by scientists and politicians to the realisation or non-realisation of fertility intentions. When an intention to have a child remains unrealised, a specific form of "gap" appears for the individual whose intention is studied. Unlike the ideal number of children, an intention measures a realistic wish to have a child and the ecological fallacy is irrelevant because both the intention and its outcome are measured at the individual level. Moreover, detailed studies of an intention and its outcome will inform about the obstacles that impeded its realisation. Such studies will provide valuable information for policy action since they not only help identify obstacles and barriers to childbearing but also the persons (or couples) affected by them, i.e. they also identify the target population for policy action.

The articles in this issue address a broad scope of issues related to fertility intentions: intended family size (life-time intentions) and short-term intentions and their realisation or frustration, the effect of uncertainty on intentions, the relevance of the theories of planned behaviour and fertility preferences and of social networks for studying couples' and competing intentions.

2 Intended Family Size

Recent research shows that the intended family size remains unrealised at the level of the whole population, and that intended parity decreases with age (Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan 2003, for the US, and Heiland et al. 2008, for Germany). In his article in the present issue, Liefbroer reaches the same conclusion for the Netherlands. He studied the stability of family size intentions and found that they adjust downwards with age. While the overall trend is a downward adjustment, family size intentions remain unchanged for some respondents, while other respondents may adjust them upwards. The study shows that intentions constructed at age 26 may remain unrealised 18 years later because they change downwards with the advancement of age. Among the reasons for the downward adjustment of women's intentions is the pursuit of a working career. Liefbroer reports also another important result: about 13% of the women and 15% of the men will have a larger number of children than they intended at age 26. This result warns against the ecological fallacy mentioned above: while the fertility gap indicates the existence of unrealised fertility, it does not inform about individuals, some of whom might experience a "surplus" of fertility (which can be either intended or unintended).

The article by Sobotka discusses the same issue using micro-census data for Austria. He notes that Austria is the European country where below-replacement intended family size was recorded for cohorts born as early as the mid-1950s. Subsequent cohorts have a similarly low intended family size and retain it through

their reproductive years of life. Moreover, a downsizing of the intended family size by age is found here too. Probably, this low intended number of children is one of the reasons why there is no particular gap between intended and achieved fertility in this country. Sobotka also does not find any significant fertility gap where levels of education are considered, although individuals with higher education tend to postpone their births. Sobotka studies one additional aspect of lifetime fertility intentions: their uncertainty, expressed by respondents as being uncertain in the number of children they wish to have (*Kinderwunsch*). Sobotka shows that if uncertain intentions were to lead to a childbirth rather than to its rejection, fertility would be considerably higher.

Isn't it reasonable then to assume that uncertain respondents could be a target for policy action? The article by Vitali et al. in this issue considers this very point of view, by examining Hakim's preference theory (2000) in 11 European countries. Hakim classified women according to their family and career preferences as "family-oriented", "career-oriented" and "adaptive". Family-oriented women are those who reveal definitive preferences to have a family as compared to pursuing a working career, while career-oriented women pertain to the opposite preferences. Each one of these groups includes about 10-30% of the women. Adaptive women, about 40–80%, do not have pronounced work-family preferences, and they are most likely to be influenced by policy incentives to have a child. Using data from the European Social Survey 2004/2005 Vitali et al. found that the classification by work-family preferences holds, to a variable degree, for actual fertility. However, they did not find any indication about its association with short-term intentions to have a child within the next 3 years.

3 Short-Term Fertility Intentions

Studies on family size intentions give valuable information about childbearing preferences in general as well as about the fertility gap. However, distinct policy-relevant information about the fulfilment of these intentions becomes available towards the end of the reproductive life when their actual realisation can be verified. Apparently inferred policy action may be of use for subsequent generations provided conditions of life do not change rapidly, as was the case, for example, in contemporary eastern Europe. An alternative approach is to use timing, or short-term fertility intentions, defined as the intention to have a child within a period of time such as 2 or 3 years. In surveys, additional questions are used to check whether the child is wanted at a later time or ever at all. Short-term intentions are more accurate than long-term intentions because an individual is expected to predict his or her life situation within the next 2 to 3 years more accurately than over a longer time period.

Intentions are a fundamental concept in social psychology. In their paper, Billari et al. apply Ajzen's socio-psychological theory of planned behaviour using survey data for Bulgaria. The operationalisation of the theory referred to short-term intentions to have a child within 2 years. According to the theory, an intention to perform a specific behaviour has three blocks of antecedents. The first one refers to the person's attitudes to the behaviour in question, the second block includes the

effect of subjective norms and the influence of close friends and relatives, and the third block presents the perceived control over the behaviour. Billari et al. found that the three blocks are of primary importance in understanding the timing of childbearing intentions, specified by parity. Perceived norms were found to be of key importance for the construction of an intention to have a first child, while attitudes are more important than norms for the construction of intentions to have a second child. Gender differences are substantial; for example perceived behavioural control is the most important antecedent for men's intentions to have a second child, while women consider negative attitudes as most important. The findings are informative for policy implications. Conventional policy instruments such as child allowances and parental leave are expected to have an effect on perceived behavioural control more than on attitudes or subjective norms; policies can thus hardly have any effect on entry into parenthood but they can be of importance for the construction of intentions to have a second child.

The application of the theory of planned behaviour (TPB) to the study of fertility has not received much attention among demographers as yet. Theoretical and practical developments are likely to emerge in the near future for the purpose of studying childbearing intentions. One FERTINT paper, by Rossier and Bernardi, suggests a contribution in this respect. They discuss the place that social learning and social support might have with respect to the TPB. In fact, Billari et al. found that a specific aspect of social learning: the number of children of "important others" has an influence on the timing intentions for entry into motherhood. Beyond doubt, social support can be of primary importance for childbearing. Within the scope of the TPB, Rossier and Bernardi provide a detailed discussion of the role that social learning and social support might have for the construction and subsequent realisation of childbearing intentions.

The case of childbearing intentions challenges the TPB in yet another way. Childbearing is a dyadic event and, when it is reasoned, it should be the consequence of a couple's intention, while the TPB describes an individual's intention. This theoretical issue can benefit from the supply of information about the dyadic character of childbearing intentions. This is the contribution of the paper by Rosina and Testa who examine the determinants of agreement and disagreement of partners in their intentions. They found that disagreement about having a child is likely to be observed in a couple where the woman holds a contemporary gender role. In particular, disagreement is more frequent among highly educated or working women as well as among cohabiting women. This finding both confirms the conflict between work and family faced by contemporary women and contributes to a better understanding of this conflict.

4 From Intentions to Childbearing

The papers by Liefbroer and Sobotka report analyses of life-time intentions (the latter paper at the macro level); the papers by Spéder and Kapitány and by Philipov analyse the realisation of timing intentions.

Spéder and Kapitány use a panel survey carried out in Hungary to analyse intentions to have a child within 3 years. They compare intentions as recorded

during the first wave with the outcome reported at the second wave and classify the respondents into several groups, such as intentional parents (persons who fulfilled their intentions to have a child), postponers (did not fulfil the intention but keep it unchanged over the next 3 years), abandoners (did not fulfil the intention and switched to the intention not to have a child over the next 3 years). This approach sheds light on the realisation of timing intentions as well as on the postponement of intended births: an issue that is rarely addressed in contemporary research at the micro-level. The findings show that demographic personal traits such as age, partnership status and parity are among the factors explaining realisation, postponement or abandonment of timing intentions. Among the structural factors they emphasise the significance of employment status: unemployed persons at the time of the first wave were more likely to become abandoners towards the time of the second wave. Attitudinal factors and particularly satisfaction with life contribute to the realisation of an intention to have a child.

Finally the paper by Philipov examines interrelations between childbearing intentions, childbearing and competing intentions and behaviour. Competing intentions and behaviour analysed in the paper include the start of a study course and entry into employment within the next 3 years. The topic is similar to the one related to actual competing behaviours experienced by young adults which is rarely addressed in terms of intentions. Philipov found that, in Bulgaria, intentions to start studying compete with the construction and subsequent realisation of childbearing intentions. Unexpectedly, the intention to enter into employment emerged as a supporting rather than a competing factor for the construction and realisation of childbearing intentions. The result might be peculiar to Bulgaria and calls for a specific analysis.

5 Pathways of Future Research

The papers in this issue show that fertility intentions can provide useful information about the factors that inhibit reproductive behaviour and that can be influenced by relevant policies. To this end, the papers cover a wide range of issues related to intentions. They discuss the timing of intentions by addressing intended family size and short-term intentions. Both inform about the number of children desired and the timing of births, as well as about the obstacles experienced in implementing fertility desires. The papers also address the uncertainty of intentions, be it at the macro- or at the micro-level. Intentions are a scientific construct, one that has been developed rigorously in theories of social psychology such as the TPB. Three FERTINT papers illustrate that demographers can greatly benefit from its application. Moreover, intentions are considered from the couple's perspective. A study on the realisation or frustration of short-term intentions informs about obstacles to childbearing and individuals' reactions to them in terms of revising their reproductive desires. As the papers present case studies, the policy implications they draw are country-specific.

The FERTINT papers also mark at least three pathways of future research. First is the theoretical development. The TPB is useful for the study of timing intentions; however, it needs further refinements and proper interpretation in the case of

fertility. Other socio-psychological theories might be relevant as well. Regretfully, the theory developed by Miller and Pasta in a series of papers (see discussion in the paper by Billari et al., this issue) has not received much attention among demographers so far. A specific approach might be required for understanding uncertain intentions and how they could be considered for policy purposes.

Second is data availability. The examination of the realisation of intentions requires at least two and preferably three waves in a panel. Data like those used by Liefbroer for the Netherlands are rare in Europe. Survey instruments need detailed discussion, and particularly measurement and operationalisation of the basic concepts. Above all, it is necessary to provide information on changes in intentions during the period between two waves and to distinguish unintended from intended births. Moreover, data and instruments need to be harmonised across countries in order to make use of international comparative analyses.

Future research on fertility intentions will help to gather knowledge that can serve as a sound basis for the elaboration of policies aiming to alleviate the obstacles encountered by couples who want more children. These policies support the fundamental human right for reproduction and indirectly may bring about a rise in fertility. This view on policies may eventually override the pro-natalist view that policies should directly aim at increasing fertility levels.

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