



The Correspondence Between Fertility Desires and Intentions

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Population Section Roundtables, Table 3: Fertility Norms and Desires

Abstract

Following the striking decline in fertility rates across high-income countries, a growing body of research has focused on the correspondence between childbearing goals and observed fertility, operationalizing the broader construct of fertility goals using both fertility desires and intentions. A complementary body of research has focused on whether and how individuals revise their fertility goals. Although fertility desires and intentions are conceptualized as different constructs in leading theories of fertility goals, they are often used interchangeably in empirical research and rarely analyzed simultaneously, in part because of limited data availability. In this presentation, I build on these theoretical and empirical advancements to analyze a largely overlooked gap, the correspondence between fertility desires and intentions. Drawing on four waves from 2011 to 2019 of the National Survey of Family Growth, I show that a significant proportion of individuals who desire a(nother) child do not intend to have one. In particular, I compute age- and parity-specific estimates and show that the fertility desires-intentions gap depends on key status attributes related to life course stages and individual agency. I conclude by discussing relevant implications for the theoretical understanding of the childbearing decision process, demographic estimations based on fertility goals, and fertility trends and social policies.

Handout

1. Fertility goals as crucial tool in demographic analyses and a key measure of interest since the development of the first fertility surveys in the 1940s.
2. Growing research on the gap between fertility goals and behaviors at the macro and individual levels and on whether and how individuals revise their fertility goals.
3. Fertility goals measurement: Fertility ideals, desires, intentions, and expectations. Fertility desires and intentions are often operationalized ambiguously in empirical research and data collection, as reflected in the retrospective classification of recent births.
4. Theoretical perspectives on fertility desires and intentions: the theory of planned behavior and the Traits-Desires-Intentions-Behaviors framework.

5. Conceptualizing the gap between fertility desires and intentions. Focus on individuals who desire a(nother) child, and analysis of the distribution and characteristics of those who *desire and intend* and those who *desire but do not intend* a(nother) child in the United States.

Table 1: The correspondence between fertility desires and intentions, ideal-type configurations.

		Fertility intentions	
		Yes	No
Fertility desires	Yes	(i) <i>Desire and intend (congruity)</i>	(ii) <i>Desire but not intend (incongruity)</i>
	No	(iii) <i>Not desire but intend (incongruity)</i>	(iv) <i>Not desire and not intend (congruity)</i>

6. As an overarching guiding hypothesis, I hypothesize that the correspondence between positive fertility desires and intentions depends on several key status attributes related to life course stages and individual agency.

Figure 1. The correspondence between fertility desires and intentions: conceptual and analytical framework.

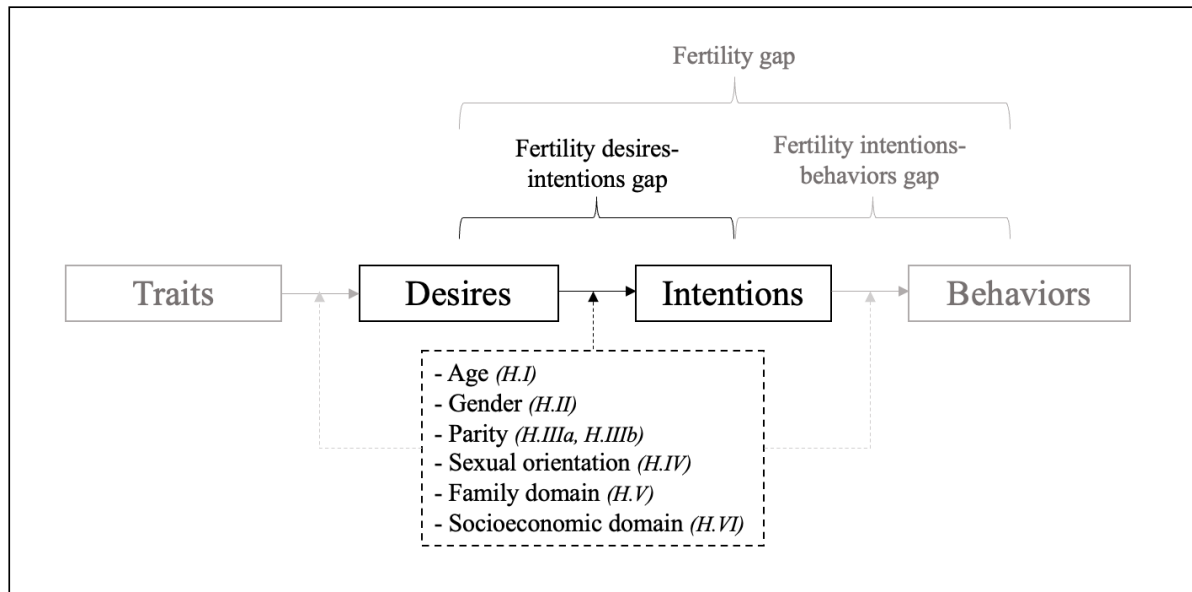


Table 2. Hypotheses.

H.I.	Older individuals who desire additional children are less likely to intend additional children than younger individuals who desire additional children.
H.II.	Women who desire more children are less likely to intend additional children than men who desire more children.
H.IIIa.	Childless individuals who desire additional children are more likely to intend additional children than individuals with children.
H.IIIb.	Among parents who desire more children, those with one child are more likely to intend additional children than those with two or more children.
H.IV.	Sexual minority individuals who desire more children are less likely to intend additional children.
H.V.	Individuals without a partner and, compared to married individuals, cohabiting individuals who desire more children are less likely to intend additional children. Furthermore, individuals with older partners and older children who desire more children are less likely to intend additional children.
H.VI.	Individuals with higher socioeconomic status who desire more children are more likely to intend additional children than those with lower socioeconomic status, particularly unemployed men.

7. **Data:** National Survey of Family Growth (NSFG) data from 2011 to 2018, men and women aged 15 to 49 who want a(nother) child and are provide a valid answer to fertility intentions question. 23,769 observations.

Fertility desires: “(Looking to the future, do / If it were possible, would) you, yourself, *want* to have (a/nother) baby at some time (after this pregnancy is over / in the future)?”

Fertility intentions: “Do you (and [name of current married or cohabiting partner]) *intend* to have (a/nother) baby at some time (in the future/after this pregnancy is over)?”

8. **Results:** Descriptive estimates: age- and parity-specific fertility desires-intentions gap (Figures 2 and 3).

Regression estimates: understanding the fertility desires-intentions gap at the individual level (Table 3).

9. **Discussion:** The gap between fertility desires and intentions, implications for (i) the estimation of demographic indicators based on fertility goals measures, (ii) the operationalization of fertility goals, (iii) social inequalities and public policies.

Figure 2. Weighted age-specific estimates of fertility intentions among respondents who want a(nother) child (N = 23,769).

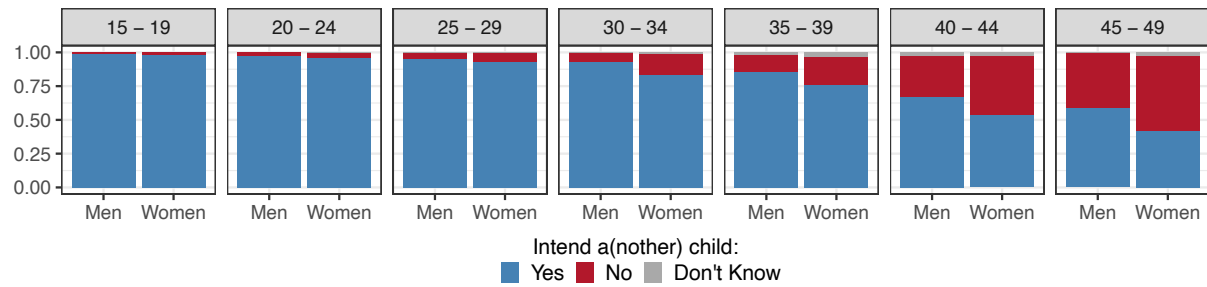


Figure 3. Weighted parity-specific estimates of fertility intentions among respondents who want a(nother) child (N = 23,769).

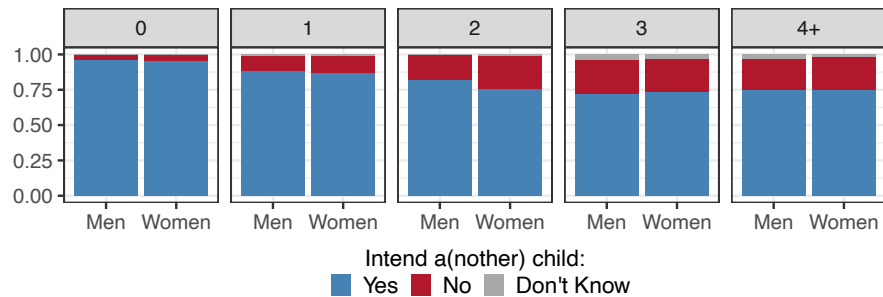


Table 3. Weighted logistic regression estimates predicting fertility intentions (conditioned on positive fertility desires). Odds Ratios and Standard Errors in odds scale. NSFG round, race and ethnicity, years of education, and importance of religion included as control variables in all regression models. Respondents aged 25 or more.

	Model 1: Baseline		Model 2: Including sexual orientation, family domain, and socioeconomic domain		Model 3: Including interactions between socioeconomic domain and gender	
	OR	SE	OR	SE	OR	SE
Age group (ref. = 25-29)						
30-34	0.54***	0.06	0.62***	0.07	0.62***	0.07
35-39	0.34***	0.04	0.47***	0.07	0.48***	0.07
40-44	0.10***	0.01	0.17***	0.03	0.18***	0.03
45-49	0.05***	0.01	0.10***	0.02	0.10***	0.02
Parity (ref. = 0 children)						
1	0.57***	0.07	0.48***	0.07	0.48***	0.07
2	0.32***	0.04	0.26***	0.03	0.26***	0.04
3	0.32***	0.06	0.25***	0.06	0.26***	0.05
4 or more	0.40***	0.11	0.32***	0.09	0.31***	0.09
Gender (ref. = Women)						
Men	1.91***	0.19	1.45**	0.17	1.05	0.29
Sexual orientation (ref. = Heterosexual)						
Bisexual			0.59*	0.13	0.60*	0.13
Gay or lesbian			0.29***	0.07	0.29***	0.07
Other/Not ascertained			1.25	0.51	1.25	0.55
Marital status (ref. = Never married)						
Cohabiting			4.92***	1.86	4.98***	1.91
Married			6.49***	2.52	6.50***	2.57
Separated or widowed			0.92	0.14	0.92	0.14
Partner's age			0.94***	0.01	0.94***	0.01
Age of last child (ref. = 0-3)						
4 or more			0.67***	0.08	0.68**	0.08
Employment status (ref. Not employed)						
Full-time			1.29	0.19	0.99	0.16

