

Uncertain timing in family planning

Laura Bernardi, *Université de Lausanne*

Monika Mynarska, *Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw*

Clementine Rossier, *Institut National d'Études Démographiques (INED)*

Introduction

The centrality of fertility intentions, planning, and decision-making is dominant in explanatory models of fertility behavior. Demographic surveys classically use the following questions to retrospectively assess the planning status of a pregnancy: “Did you want to have a(nother) child before this pregnancy started?” (yes, no, do not know). If the woman answers “Yes” or “I do not know”, she is further asked: “At what time did you want a(nother) child?” (sooner, about at that time, later, do not know). Using answers to these two questions, pregnancies are classified as “wanted” (at that time or earlier), “unwanted”, and “mistimed” (wanted later); the sum of all “unwanted” and “mistimed” pregnancies are labeled “unintended” or “unplanned” pregnancies. “Do not know” answers are usually classified with other responses. The same questions (allowing for some adjustments in wording) are used to measure current fertility intentions in demographic surveys: “Do you want a(nother) child?” (yes, no, do not know). If the woman answers “yes” or “I do not know”, she is further asked: “When do you want a(nother) child ?” (number of months), and often “How many (more) children do you want?” Note that the two first questions can be combined into one, as in: “Do you intend to have a(nother) child in the next three years?”

During the last fifteen years, the retrospective measures of whether a pregnancy was planned or not have been criticized. New measures have been tested and progress has been made in the field (Barrett and Wellings 2000; Luker 1996; Luker 1999; Santelli et al. 2003; Santelli et al. 2009; Speizer et al. 2004). Also when it comes to measuring the intended or unintended status of pregnancy prospectively, researchers have asked whether the question “Do you want a(nother) child?” was too simple to capture the multidimensionality of childbearing intentions (Miller et al. 1999).

In general terms, intention can be defined as an indicator of “how hard people are willing to try, how much of an effort they are planning to exert in order to perform the behavior” (Ajzen 1991, p. 181). But researchers have come to realize that forming of a childbearing intention is a multistage and multidimensional process. The literature on the status of one’s intent to be pregnant shows that when analyzing fertility intentions we should, at the very least, consider two aspects: the goal towards which the intention is directed (to have a child), and the timeframe in which to realize it (Santelli et al. 2009; Speizer et al. 2004). Consequently, the strength of an intention can refer to the timeline (“How hard are people willing to try to have a child in the next three years?”), but at the more basic level it also depends on how much a behavioral goal is valued, how strongly it is desired. Before a precise intention to have a child in a given time perspective can be formed, a psychological state of *wanting* a child should be

present. Acknowledging this fact, some researchers go as far as seeing desires as the affective dimension of intention (Stanford et al. 2000).

In our research we examine the multiple dimensions of declarations of fertility intentions in order to provide a critical reading of current indicators of the decision-making processes leading to childbearing. Using a qualitative approach, we pay attention to the complexity of individuals making (or fail to make) plans regarding their reproductive future. In the next section we discuss a typology of fertility intentions grounded on empirical data from semi-structured interviews with women and men of reproductive age in Germany, Poland, Hungary, Bulgaria, France, and Italy. The typology builds on two dimensions: we consider individual's intention to have a child in a given time perspective (three years) and also a child desire that underpins this intention. Our data show that these two-dimensional perspectives, although they account for some of the observed diversity of intentions, do not capture the complete picture

In addition to the extreme categories (the strong, definite intention to have a child within short time frame, versus the strong, definite intention to exclude childbearing over a long period of time), we found several intermediate fertility intentions, characterized not only by different levels of uncertainty, but also by different sources of uncertainty. While it may not be necessary to introduce the specific source of uncertainty in each and every analysis of fertility intentions, we show that depending on the source of uncertainty, the predictive value of intentions on fertility outcomes varies – especially in the relation to *timing of childbearing*.

Sample and Method

For the purpose of this paper, we analyzed a set of 261 semi-structured, face-to-face interviews conducted in four European countries between 2004 and 2007. Our sample consists of 97 inter-views conducted in Cagliari and Naples (Italy), 92 in Rostock and Lübeck (Germany), 45 in Warsaw (Poland) and 27 in Poitiers (France)¹. In all interviews, numerous questions on childbearing experiences and expectations were posed to respondents, providing rich narrative data on our topic of interest. The respondents were asked about their fertility plans, and about the factors that influenced their reproductive decisions. The issue of childbearing timing was also addressed.

Table 1. Distribution of respondents by country and sex

Country	Women	Men	Total
Italy	87	10	97
Germany	53	39	92
Poland	24	21	45
France	15	12	27
Total	179	82	261

In most national samples, ages range between 20 and 35 (mean age 30.4 years for women and 30 for men). Only 32 respondents (in the Italian and German samples) are older than 35. We included respondents that were childless and respondents with children, and those of differing marital status. The basic sample characteristics are presented in Table 2, below. Due to differences in educational levels among the analyzed countries, we regrouped respondents

¹ We would like to acknowledge all researchers who contributed to the coding of interviews on which this paper is based for their invaluable contribution in the original language. In order Laura Cavalli, Arianna Caporali, Clémentine Rossier, Sylvia Keim, Andreas Klärner, Anne Salles, Sara Brachet, Marie Thérèse Letablier, Elitsa Dimitrova, Atanas Atanasov and Judit Durst.

into only two large educational groups. More details on the sample, as well as on the coding procedures, can be found in Bernardi and Mynarska (2010).

Table 2. Distribution of respondents by sex, parity, marital status and education

Variable	Categories	Number of respondents
Sex	Female	179
	Male	82
Parity	Childless	147
	With offspring	114
Marital status	Married	107
	Cohabiting	47
	In a stable relationship but living apart	56
	No partner	47
	Divorced or information missing	4
Educational level	University degree (at least first-stage tertiary education)	107
	No university degree (maximum post-secondary education)	154

Following the “grounded theory” approach to data analysis, we explored the narrative material to detect all passages in which topics of childbearing intentions, desires, or plans were addressed, and we used bottom-up (open) coding to identify the different types of fertility intentions. To start with, we defined the behavioral goal similarly to how it was usually phrased in the surveys: to have a child at some point during the three years subsequent to the interview date. At the same time, however, we focused on differences between the respondents with respect to how they expressed and explained their intentions. We paid special attention to any sources of uncertainty in respondents’ planning, in particular, in relation to the timing dimension.

Results: A typology of fertility intentions: desire and timing

We distinguished six categories of childbearing intentions in the respondents’ narrations. The names and definitions of all categories, along with example quotes from the interviews, are presented in table 3. For each category we also indicate how many respondents fall in it.

/Table 3 about here/

In the case of the two extreme categories, “*Definitively yes (a child as a project)*” and “*Definitively no (a child is excluded)*”, respondents’ intentions are formulated clearly and with a large degree of certainty. They explicitly express their–positive or negative–childbearing desire and they are clear about the timeframe. If we asked the respondents in these two categories a standard survey question concerning whether they intended to have a child in the next three years, they would answer “certainly yes,” and “certainly no,” respectively. In our sample, 101 individuals stated firm intentions such as these. The other 160 expressed some level of uncertainty about their fertility plans. These respondents fall into the remaining four categories of intentions: “*Contingent intention (a child as soon as...)*,” “*Far intention (a child – for sure, but later)*,” “*Indifferent intention (a child – maybe)*,” or “*Ambivalent intention (a child – at times yes, at times no)*.” Importantly, the remaining four intermediate categories do not differ in the degree of uncertainty but in its sources, in the way in which the uncertainty is expressed and dealt with. In other words, the differences between the categories are not of a quantitative nature, but are instead qualitative.

First of all, the uncertainty revealed by the respondents relates to both of the aforementioned dimensions of childbearing intentions. For some respondents, the uncertainty is related to the timing of childbearing, but for others, the doubts have a more fundamental nature: they are not sure whether they want to have a child at all (child desire).

Second, the uncertainty has two different sources. For some, it is related to various external conditions: available financial resources, aspects related to employment, education, housing, lack of a partner, and so forth. In other cases, the uncertainty stems from internal, psychological factors, and is related not only to individuals' attitudes or values, but also to their maturity and psychological readiness.

The external sources of uncertainty dominate in the narratives of the respondents who belong to the "*Contingent intention (a child as soon as...)*" category. These interviewees would like to have a child as soon as possible, but they identify various external obstacles that prevent them from pursuing this goal. These barriers could be related to partnership (e.g. the respondents lack a partner or their relationship is not satisfactory), the labor market (e.g. the respondents are unemployed, their employment is not stable, or their jobs are difficult to combine with childbearing), or to the respondents' material situation (e.g., insufficient housing or low income).

The obstacles, listed in the interviews, are not necessarily within the respondents' control, and it is not always possible to predict if and when the challenges might be overcome. The interviewees are not able to forecast when they will have a job or when they will find the ideal partner. Consequently, the individuals might not be able to give any time horizon for realization of their fertility intentions. The removal of other barriers might be easier to foresee. For instance, if a respondent wants to have a child as soon as possible, but he or she feels it would be too strenuous to become a parent while taking a full-time course of study, the point at which the course will be over is relatively predictable. In such a case, childbearing is conditional on an event that respondents hope will occur sometime soon, but which they feel they have not fully mastered.

The internal sources of uncertainty are revealed most of all by the respondents who belong to the categories "*Indifferent intention (a child – maybe)*" and "*Ambivalent intention (a child – at times yes, at times no)*." In these categories, interviewees' inability to formulate certain and clear childbearing intentions is of a different nature and is related most strongly to their personal, internal motivation, desires, and values. Considerations of external factors are not completely missing from their narratives, but they are not decisive.

In the first category ("*Indifferent intention*"), we find individuals who sometimes openly declare that they have never considered becoming parents or having another child. They are vague about their childbearing desires and intentions, and—even when prompted by the interviewer—are unable to formulate any clear statements on the topic. In other cases, even though the issue of childbearing has been considered, the inability to take a decision as to *whether* and *when* to have a child remains.

Generally, the respondents in this category do not consider any external factors, when they speak about their doubts related to childbearing intentions. Instead, they say that they do not feel psychologically ready for children yet, or they express various fears related to parenthood (e.g., they fear the loss of personal freedom, a reduced standard of living, or being a bad parent). They also frequently list other life goals (mainly related to personal development) that have priority over parenthood, and which make them uncertain about their childbearing intentions. Notably, respondents in this category do not intend to have a child soon, but at the same time, this possibility is not completely ruled out. Moreover, explicitly negative child desires are by and large absent from their narrations. The respondents might be vague about

their motivation to have a child, but they do not want to remain childless. Instead, they maintain an open and uncommitted attitude towards parenthood.

Internal sources of uncertainty also prevail in the category “*Ambivalent intention (a child – at times yes, at times no)*.” Interestingly, this category includes only women, and they are characterized by wavering between a desire to have a child and the opposite. Consequently, they express contradictory intentions through the interview. In their narratives, the women demonstrate that the external conditions are not crucial in their decision-making processes; indeed, they are frequently not mentioned at all. Rather, the wavering is related to individuals’ alternating between more or less defined fears of childrearing or perceived personal immaturity on the one hand, and the foreseen satisfaction and social approval related to having a first or subsequent child. In some cases, the women are convinced that they *should* and *will* have children one day, but at the same time they do not feel inclined towards motherhood. They have other priorities in life and want to pursue other goals, which they perceive as incompatible with childbearing. They want to concentrate on education and professional development as well as on their hobbies. At the same time, they feel that they miss a very important thing in their lives by not being mothers. For all women in this category, a conflict of internal motives can be observed. This conflict is particularly strong, if a woman feels that she is close to the age, when it might be difficult for her to get pregnant. In such cases, she might be convinced that she *should* have a child soon, but she is not able to formulate such intention.

Internal and external factors are mixed in the last category: “*Far intention (a child – for sure, but later)*.” Respondents in this category are certain about their intention to have a child in future. They express a clear, positive desire for children, but they feel that it is not a decision to make at this very moment. The topic is not a priority for them, they do not feel psychologically ready for parenthood, and numerous external conditions are also missing. These are usually young, childless respondents, who have not yet left the parental home, and are still in formal education without stable employment.

The best way to translate the perspective of respondents in this category would be to think of them as not even having entered the “population at risk,” susceptible to deciding whether or not to have a child. None of them would state an intention to have a child in the next three years. Nevertheless, this group of respondents is distinctly different from those belonging to the “*Definitively no (child is excluded)*” category. First, they frequently express extremely positive attitudes towards children and a very strong motivation to become parents in future, while the respondents in the “*Definitively no*” category are not child-oriented and they allow a possibility of never having a (another) child. Second, some of the respondents in this category think of having a child in the next three to five years, which is at the limit of our predefined time frame. Consequently, we list “*Far intention (a child – for sure, but later)*” among uncertain categories: the respondents here are almost but not completely certain that they will not have a child in the next three years.

Conclusions: Uncertainty of timing

We developed a typology of fertility intentions along two key dimensions: individual’s intention to have a child in a given time perspective (three years) and a child desire that underlies this intention. Our results show that taking dimensions of desire and of fertility timing into account is a valid approach as individuals discuss their childbearing plans by referring to them. Importantly, the respondents also express uncertainty accordingly: some of them are uncertain about the timing of childbearing, while others have more fundamental doubts as to whether they want to have a child at all.

There are two distinct sources of uncertainty: external conditions on the one hand, and psychological, internal conditions on the other. The two groups of conditions are by no means homogeneous. External factors, listed in the interviews, relate to several spheres of life (e.g. partnership, economic activity, education) over which the individual's degree of control varies. In some cases, it is possible to predict when the external obstacles that prevent a person from having children will be removed. In other cases, it is difficult or completely impossible to say when (if at all) they will be overcome. Similarly, uncertainty related to personal motives might stem from the respondent's indifference towards childbearing, but also from conflicting attitudes towards having children. Competing life goals and normative pressure also play an important role here. Such a variety of sources of doubts and uncertainties in declaring a fertility intention cannot be dismissed or simplified. Different sources and types of uncertainty have a decisive role for how individual childbearing plans are formulated and how precise the time horizon for their realization is defined. Table 4 summarizes the relationship between childbearing desires and the envisioned probability of having a child in different time frames for different categories of intention.

Table 4. A typology of childbearing intentions: desire and prospected time frames

Child desire	Declared intention	Envisioned time frame for having a child		
		<i>Now</i>	<i>Close future (up to 3 years)</i>	<i>Distant future</i>
Positive	Surely yes	Yes	Yes	-
	Contingent	No	Depends on contingencies	Depends on contingencies
	Far	No	No	Yes
Mixed	Indifferent (Vague desires, negative desires are missing)	No	Unable to say – open, uncommitted	Unable to say – open, uncommitted
	Ambivalent (Negative and positive desires)	No	Unable to say – waving	Unable to say – waving
Negative	Surely no	No	No	Maybe, but not necessarily

To sum up, our results show that when classifying intentions, we must distinguish between the reasons related to the desirability of the outcome, and the reasons related to the ability to define a time frame for achieving the outcome. Moreover, uncertainty appeared to stem from a variety of sources: external conditions, individual development, competing goals, and personal attitudes. Depending on the source of uncertainty, the predictability of the intentions varies. If we want to predict people's reproductive behaviors based on their intentions, a much better comprehension of types and sources of uncertainty is necessary.

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Table 3. Categories of fertility intentions

Category	Respondents	Description	Example
<i>Definitively yes (a child as a project)</i>	29 childless 32 parents	Respondents express a clear-cut and strong intention to become parents. They desire to have a child, the intention is a concrete project, the time frame is short or the active attempts to become pregnant are already in place.	<p>“Another child? Yes, we are planning... No. We have been trying to have another one for two months. I’m happy, I feel fine, so it is the right moment.” (Italy, Female, 33, married, 1 child)</p> <p>“Earlier, I never thought about children. But for three, four years, it has become clearer and for two years I have known for sure that we want to have children (...) Now, it is important for me to earn money and to take responsibility as a father. That’s my perspective. We want to create a family and that is beautiful.” (Germany, Male, 34, cohabiting, childless)</p>
<i>Contingent intention (a child as soon as...)</i>	36 childless 20 parents	Respondents mention a variety of reasons that interfere with their intention to have an otherwise strongly desired child at present. Conditions in this category are generally perceived to be external factors, not necessarily within the respondents’ control.	<p>“Finances, that’s a problem. For a child, you need to have something saved, at least some money. Or, I don’t know – if D. [wife] doesn’t work [for some time] and raises a child, I should have a job then. At the moment, there’s no such opportunity and that holds us back. This issue most of all: finances.” (Poland, Male, 30, married, childless)</p> <p>“When I joke, I say: Insemination, or the first man who passes by, because I have this huge desire. But I cannot think only about myself; I have to think about the child too, one day /so that a child has a father/. It is already difficult enough to live in society, but if I make him start on the wrong foot...” (Italy, Female, 31, single, childless)</p>
<i>Far intention (a child – for sure, but later)</i>	45 childless 8 parents	Respondents desire to have a child, but parenthood is perceived as something that does not belong to the near future. Their reasoning is less centered on external obstacles and more on the perceived distance, with the issue as a priority. Intentions relate to a distant, often undefined, future.	<p>“In an absolute sense, yes of course! I intend to start a family later. Yes. But it’s not something I’m thinking about every morning (...) There is a whole sequence to be put into place... Right now, basic things, like the fact that I’m not earning a living at the moment; I don’t think I can have a child yet. Besides, you have to find the right person.” (France, Male, 27, single, childless)</p>

<p><i>Indifferent intention (a child – maybe)</i></p>	<p>19 childless 21 parents</p>	<p>Respondents do not express any strong desire to have a child, but negative desires are absent from narrations and the possibility of having a child in the next three years is not ruled out. At times, they declare that they have never thought about having a(nother) child. They are also indifferent with respect to timing. They maintain an open and noncommittal attitude towards the possibility of childbearing.</p>	<p>“For the moment, I say no, but you never know (...) I'm 40, I feel old, but I cannot exclude the possibility.. maybe I can find the right man and... who knows?” (Italy, Female, 40, LAT relationship, 2 children)</p> <p>“Well, if it happens, it happens; this is not the question, I would not abort. But, if you can plan it, you should not plan that the child comes when the future is uncertain, when both partners do not know exactly where to go (...) I think a good time would be when both can really imagine having a child. This could be, maybe, the end of this year or next year or in two or three years. I am very spontaneous there; as I said, one cannot plan these things.” (Germany, female, 29, cohabiting, childless)</p>
<p><i>Ambivalent intention (a child – at times yes, at times no)</i></p>	<p>8 childless 3 parents</p>	<p>Respondents are characterized by wavering between the desire to have a child and the opposite. Respondents express contradictory intentions or are not able to formulate them at all. Time frame is not clear.</p>	<p>“Honestly speaking, it's not a normal way of thinking, normal in the sense of how a woman thinks about a child. And I guess this 'not-being-normal' is connected to the fact that I don't think about a child because I want to have a child now, but I think about a child because (...) I think that there is a time when one should have children. If I will want to have children after I'm 40 – it's going to be too late (...) And this is rather the reason why I think about children, not that I would like to have kids so much now and I have such a strong maternal instinct. I don't have a maternal instinct at all; moreover, when I see somebody else's children, they in fact irritate me.” (Poland, female, 29, married, childless)</p> <p>“I don't know... the need to organize a full life... Everyday routine... from morning to night, everything is scheduled... I'd need to transform my whole life... But sometimes the idea of becoming a mother excites me... Sometimes I say, 'why not?' But then... oh my God, no...!” (Italy, Woman, 34, LAT, childless)</p>
<p><i>Definitely no (a child is excluded)</i></p>	<p>10 childless 30 parents</p>	<p>Respondents are adamant in reporting their intentions not to have any or any additional children. Even if respondents accept the possibility of changing their intention in the future, this is perceived as something very distant and rather unlikely.</p>	<p>“From my feeling, I would say: no children. Maybe this will change in five years' time, but at the moment I would say: no children, I cannot imagine having children. Not in my world!” (Germany, Female, 31, LAT, childless)</p>