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Considerations about the Term "Intention" based on Qualitative Data about Fertility Behaviour

Introduction

Rather often demographers assume that the decision for a child looks like that:



But actually it looks more like that:



Theory of planned behaviour

Ajzen and Fishbein (2005) discuss in their **theory of planned behavior** the fertility decision-making process. They want to predict behaviour and report that intentions are good indicators for predicting behaviour, especially when people have their act under volitional control. Intentions are formed by three factors, attitudes toward behaviour, subjective norms and perceived behaviour control.

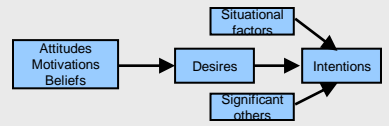
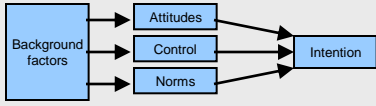
Ajzen and Fishbein (2005) argue that **intentions** are the driving force behind people's activities and the main element regarding their planned behaviour. Intentions are considered to be reflected decisions with regard to an individual fertility plan that refers to the concrete outcome, of having a child in a set time frame. This means intentions are based on conscious action. (Billari, Philipov et al. 2009) and refer to a concrete plan. Dommermuth, Jane et al. (2009) differentiate between short-term intentions that are concrete, which means that people want to have a child now and long-term intentions where they consider having a child within the next three years. It is pointed out that concrete intentions have a better prediction power than the other ones, **because intentions are only significant in the short run** (Philipov, Thévenon et al. 2009).

Miller and Pasta approach

Miller and Pasta (1995) point out that in different studies intentions are operationalized in different ways. Several kinds of questions have been asked and all of them have been interpreted as intentions.

In their study they distinguish between questions of **desire** which refer to what people want to do and **intention** which ask for answers that describe what people plan to do.

They argue that motivations, attitudes and beliefs lead to desires. Desires are wishes and therefore do not directly lead to action. They represent what individuals want. Desires might then be translated into intentions which are conscious commitments to act in a certain way. Intentions in comparison to desires take situational factors into account and they are affected by desires of significant others. This means that intentions contain own desires as well as desires of significant others and situational factors (Miller and Pasta 1995). Miller and Pasta (1995) point out that the influence of significant others and especially of the spouse is extremely important when we analyse fertility decisions and the timing of a child: fertility decisions must be considered as couple decisions.



Empirical evidence

Studies have shown that the intended family size is higher than the realized one (Goldstein et al. 2003, Toulemon and Testa 2006). Liefbroer (2009) found in his research that **family size intentions** are complex and **not stable**. He assumes that people adjust their family size intention if the realisation of their plans becomes more unlikely as they get older and therefore many **adjust their family intentions** downwards. Monnier (1989) assumed that because people constantly overestimate their future fertility they are likely to only have one possible future in mind, rather than expressing a well thought strategy.

Kirchler, Rodler et al. (2001) argue that based on their research - a couple diary study - spouses rarely sit around a table to discuss objective arguments to reach a decision. Further, **people tend not to have a direct focus** on one aim. Aims and feelings are often mixed up and hence, a decision is never an isolated incident, but connected to the complexity of everyday life.

Additionally, the wishes and values of the partner need to be considered which are often not clear and change quite regularly.

Research has shown that several people report that they prefer to make or have already made a "no-decision" considering fertility (Borchardt and Stöbel-Richter 2004).

Definition of intention

Intentions are considered to be reflected decisions. With regard to an individual fertility plan they refer to a concrete plan with a clear outcome, like having a child in a special time frame.

Sampling

The interviewees were selected on the basis of theoretical sampling. Snowball sampling was used to choose the participants. Couples who are childless and around the age of 30 have been interviewed. 21 interviews with 13 women and 8 of their male partners were conducted.

Methodological approach

The data were analysed with a combination of **grounded theory** and **objective hermeneutic sequence analysis**. 'Rough analysis' has been used and the techniques of 'open coding', 'axial coding' and 'selective coding'. Because qualitative research is a circular process, analysing and collecting data are not separate but very closely connected courses of action.

Results

When we look at the definition of "intention" above we can see that there is a strong link between planning and the special way someone wants to deal with the issue. If intention is defined like that then it is not the right term to use when it comes to long term fertility decisions.

We talk about things and then we let things develop. We fix our target so that the way is clear and then we live and we will see what happens. (Paul, male 43)

We argue here that people have ideas about how life shall develop, however, they do not fix a target. Most of the interviewees consider the issue of childbearing as something remotely lying in the future **without a concrete plan**.

Well Maria brings it up from time to time but we do not talk about it in detail with a time schedule like we will finish this and then we will have kids? it is more diffuse, well later. (Armin, male 33)

All interview partners had a general agreement about the issue of fertility. All of them knew how their partner considers children in general. Most of my interview partners agreed that they want to have children one day in the future. However, what I learned from my interviewees is that they do not follow a well thought-out plan, though.

It is not the case that my partner and I are really planning (a child) already. (Chris, male 32)

Dommermuth, Jane et al. (2009) argue that women have stronger childbearing intentions than men. Rille-Pfeiffer (2009) found that the impulse to discuss the issue of children is often initiated by women. Further, for men can be said that the wish to have a child was strongly connected with their partner's wish whereas women had much more own ideas about this issue and her ideas were described as more important (Rille-Pfeiffer 2009). From our understanding we would not say that the intentions of women are stronger, but rather that they have more and concrete ideas about living with a child. However, in our sample we had men as well as women who wanted a child earlier than their partner and that person was the one bringing up the issue from time to time.

"It is not a real topic, it is similar with the marriage topic, " from time to time I bring up the topic "laugh" and then he answers "yes sometime I would like to have children but not yet" "laugh" and this was the conversation in most cases." (Caro, female 30 years)

As we can see they have decided on having a child but all the rest is not discussed at all. However, for having an intentions it would be necessary to plan accordingly. Some even argue that they don't think that the decision will be a planned one.

Well I don't think that it will be a planned decision, because in that case we will never have a child. (Jenny, female 30 years)

Three of my interview partners, however, had already **decided to get a child**, but were not pregnant by the time of the interview. Only for these three persons I argue that the term "**intention**" would be correct. They did plan when to start.

After we had been together for quite some time, we thought well now we can think about children. This was in January and we thought well we will start in August (Marion, female 30years)

It has been described in the interviews that the point when to get children suddenly appears and also disappears when things change, and hardly any long term planning is made like considering three or five years. Also the number of children was strongly discussed and here different ideas of the partners meet and have to be combined. However, because the issue was described as something that is hardly discussed these decisions are often postponed.

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Discussion

I don't argue that people have no ideas about their future, they do have. However, I doubt that they have intentions when it comes to fertility in the long run. Miller and Pasta (1995) argue that the desire comes first and then the intentions. This comes closer to the findings of this qualitative work. Also Dommermuth, Jane et al. (2009) argue that short term intentions are better predictors. Only very shortly before the decision is made from my understanding I would talk about intentions. From our findings we can only conclude that **intentions is not the right concept** unless a person is very sure to get a child in a very close time frame.

