

## Intentions, Uncertainty, and Ambivalence in Fertility Decisions

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Fertility intentions may be more or less defined or ambiguous for individuals and couples. This paper is devoted to the analysis of individuals' accounts of their fertility intentions in relation to their partnership, their family orientations, their life course situation and perspectives. We develop a typology of fertility intentions to understand the meaning attributed to desiring, intending, and planning a child in contemporary Europe.

### Data and methods

Narrative interviews data are the basis of a comparative content analysis of fertility intentions in contexts characterized by very diverse fertility patterns. We use interviews from France, eastern and western Germany, various regions in Italy, Poland and Bulgaria. Data were collected by national research teams and made available in the form of audio files and verbatim digitalized transcriptions. We focused on childless individuals and parents of one child since respondents with these characteristics were present in all national samples and because dealing with fertility intentions and realizations in low fertility contexts the choice between having and not having children and whether to have a second child appear to be most relevant.

We performed a thematic coding of fertility intentions which was coordinated as follows: in the weeks following the meeting, each team classified and coded the relevant passages of its own interviews according to the kind of fertility intentions they could identify. Each team sent its work to a coordination team, which put together the various typologies to construct a common shared coding structure. All interviews were then recoded according to the common typology.

### A typology of fertility intentions

We developed six categories of fertility intention which cover exhaustively all cases encountered in the interviews. The six categories are distinguished according to the type of arguments expressing the intention to have a (first or second) child and the time frame to which they refer to. The categorization is mutually exclusive (no interview is coded under two such categories); in cases in which intentions could fit two or more categories, the relative weight of the conflicting interviews passages has been considered to assign the intention to a specific category group. The six categories are:

- (1) *Sure intention to have a child*: Respondents intend to have a child within a close time frame and a high degree of certainty. In this case the intention is equivalent to explicit planning a child, either within maximum 2 years time or at the time of the interview active attempts to get pregnant are already in place (30 childless and 35 parents belong to this category)
- (2) *Sure intention not to have a child*: Respondents are sure in reporting their intentions not to have any or any additional child. They either miss the desire or

- they have priorities in life which are perceived as competing with parenthood or family enlargement (10 childless and 30 parents)
- (3) *Contingent conditions define fertility intentions*: These are cases in which respondents explicitly mention one or several conditions as obstacles which interfere with planning an otherwise desired child. A change in some of these conditions does not seem easily predictable for respondents; the category include cases in which despite respondents claim that it is not the right moment to have a child, they make clearly inconsistent use of contraceptive methods, risking a pregnancy (36 childless and 20 parents).
  - (4) *Uncertain intentions*: these are cases in which respondents do not express any desire to have a child but the possibility is not ruled out. These are individuals who sometimes openly declare that they have never thought about becoming parent or having another child, who are uncertain about the time frame they would prefer, and want to maintain an open and non-committing attitude towards the possibility of childbearing (19 childless and 21 parents)
  - (5) *Ambivalent intentions*: this category represents cases in which respondents waver between the desire to have a child and its contrary, they play with the idea of staying childless or with one child but at the same time think they will end up having a child. Generally these contradicting positions are not argued with reference to material conditions, but rather refer to fears about the responsibility of childrearing and personal maturity on the one hand and the joys and satisfactions of having children on the other (8 childless and 3 parents).
  - (6) *Long term perspective*: In this category respondents who desire to have a first child, and yet mostly because of their young ages or their specific life course situation (living with parents, not having had a partner in the last years) parenthood is perceived as something that belongs to the distant future. (45 childless).

First, we interpret the defined categories in dialogue with Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB). The constructs that TPB indicates as determinants of fertility intentions are coded and used to distinguish the arguments provided by respondents talking about their intentions. For example, lacking behavioral control due to unemployment or an instable job situation, is perceived as an obstacle for those belonging to the *contingent condition* category (see category (3)), but it does not enter the reasoning of those belonging to the ambivalent group (see category (5)). Results provide an empirically grounded typology of individual fertility intentions ranging from rather defined to uncertain and ambivalent intentions. Life course orientations and contingencies are shown to relate to one or the other typology in systematic ways. In particular we examine the way different fertility intentions were articulated, in respondents' discourses, with social norms on parenthood, child care provisions and practices, gender and intergenerational relations, individual values, social influence within social networks, economic employment insecurities and uncertainties related to other life course spheres

Second we contrast the typology of fertility intentions with results based on survey data coming from representative populations in the same countries. Our typology, developed from empirical data following a bottom-up approach, shows how declaration of intentions captured in surveys may be subject to measurement errors and therefore may not be necessarily reliable in some cases. Women who are either ambivalent or whose decision depend on contingent conditions are likely to vary their declared intentions depending on short term variation in their situation.

