

What Predicts Fertility Intention Persistence and Change during Adolescence and Middle Adulthood?

Extended Abstract

To what extent are fertility intentions actualized? Early articulators and females tend to be most persistent in their decisions. Pol (1983) found that, among women aged 19 to 24, 95 percent of those women who reported childless expectations in 1970 maintained those decisions five years later. In comparison, only 62 percent of women who reported childbearing intentions in 1970 had children by 1975. Of the remaining 38 percent, one third had changed their intentions and reported childless expectations in 1975 (this was 9 percent of all women who reported childbearing intentions in 1970). Pol (1983) concluded that “these data indicate that while the intention to not have children is a fairly stable one, the intention to have a child is subject to change and even over what might be considered a relatively short time span” (322) and “while the intention for zero children is one that most retain, the intentions to have children is subject to change” (326). By definition, early deciders have made a deliberate, conscious decision early in life. It may be that any changes or doubts in their decision-making process were reconciled before data collection. A more probable explanation is that the motivations or reasoning underlying early decisions to remain childless are more powerful than those underlying later childless or childbearing decisions and occur at a crucial time during development when they are incorporated into children’s internal working models (Bowlby, 1982) that influence negotiations of later developmental tasks (e.g., family formation). Process-oriented explanations will be discussed in more detail below.

Limited knowledge exists about changes in fertility intentions over the life course for the three methodological reasons: (1) research is limited to married persons and whether married partners agree or disagree about childbearing decisions (numbers and timing of children), (2)

failure of researchers to differentiate between delayers and voluntarily childless individuals, and (3) lack of prospective data beginning in adolescence. This study is not subject to these methodological limitations because it utilizes prospective panel data collected when youth were as young as age 15 to assess fertility intentions prior to marital and parenthood transitions and to directly evaluate intentions across development.

Table 1 presents a variety of ways leading up to fertility outcomes. These patterns are most parsimoniously differentiated by whether a decision is made actively or passively. The first column of Table 1 is divided into four sections that differentiate among types of “deciders”: deciders and maintainers; deciders and switchers; perpetual postponers; and uncertain. The former two categories are defined by active decision-making and the latter two categories are defined by passive decision-making. Each of these types of deciders is further categorized according to fertility outcomes, resulting in either voluntary childlessness (VC) or parenthood (P). Characteristic patterns of each decider type – fertility outcome pair are outlined in column 3 and reasons/ descriptions of these patterns are specified in column 4. This table is not comprehensive given limited empirical evidence and theoretical explanations concerning decider-outcome patterns in the literature. The proposed study aims to describe decision-making persistence in terms of fertility intentions and outcomes spanning from age 15 until age 45. This will help to describe and clarify various patterns noted in Table 1 and to explore new patterns that emerge.

The proposed study examines the patterns of intention change and persistence for all offspring over time as well as their actual fertility behaviors. Research questions of interest for this study include: Do youth change their fertility intentions over time? If so, what factors are responsible for those changes and how do they differ across various fertility intentions? If not,

what factors remain influential across time? The assumption is that patterns outlined in Table 1 will be represented and that analyses will clarify which patterns are most prominent for this sample as well as how and why they occur. Furthermore, subgroup heterogeneity among offspring who report childless intention (early and late deciders) will be assessed in terms of stability, timing, and determinant patterns thereby testing the hypothesis that early and late deciders are two distinct subgroups of childless intending persons. Figure 1 represents models of change versus stability for early deciders, late deciders, and perpetual postponers. This model applies to people choosing to have children as well. It may be that youth who decide either to have children early in childhood or adolescence will maintain those decisions due to attitudinal and personality factors as well as early life experiences (e.g., quality of parented experience, affinity for children, parental divorce). Later life experiences may result in fertility intention changes as youth go through educational, employment, and romantic relationship transitions. Individuals who never marry are less likely to have children than those who eventually marry. It may be that intentionally childless individuals self-select out of marriage. Others may never marry due to compromised marriageability of potential mates, in turn, transforming previous intentions to have children into expectations to never have children. Due to its prospective longitudinal nature, this study lends itself to teasing apart these explanations.

Using both the Intergenerational Study of Families and Children (ISFC) and the National Longitudinal Study of Youth (NLSY-79), I examine shifts in fertility intentions across late adolescence through early and middle adulthood. I categorize fertility intentions in terms of wanting none, one, two-or-three, and four-or-more children. This equates to wanting no children, a small family, an average size family, and a large family according to American perceptions of family size. Specific questions of interest include: (i) How stable are fertility

intentions and does stability differ for those who do and do not intend to have children? (ii) Do youth who report childless expectations make their decisions earlier, simultaneously, or later than youth who intend to have children? (iii) Are these decisions more, less, or similarly stable compared to youth who report parenting expectations? Given that childlessness opposes the status quo, in turn requiring more active decision-making, it is hypothesized that youth who intend to remain childless will express their intentions at earlier ages (in keeping with identity formation theory), with greater certainty, and will maintain their intentions/ decisions more than youth who do not intend to remain childless.

To what extent do family formation intentions change or remain persistent? Answering this research question entails modeling the off-diagonals (people who have changed their intentions over time) and the on-diagonals (people who have persisted in their intentions over time). Furthermore, I examine the shifts in behaviors (e.g., child birth) that accompany or fail to accompany shifts in intentions. I especially focus on meaningful shifts upward ($0 \rightarrow 1$, $1 \rightarrow 2$) and downward ($2 \rightarrow 1$, $1 \rightarrow 0$, $2 \rightarrow 0$) and treat persistence of childless intentions ($0 \rightarrow 0$) as a special case.

Not only do I describe trends in persistence or change in terms of prevalence rates; using the ISFC I assess family level and individual level factors that may be responsible for these changes (e.g., parental divorce, marital status, educational attainment, changes in attitudes toward traditional roles, etc.). I use both parametric and nonparametric analyses to answer this question. I begin by using 85 percent Confidence Interval Box Plots (a .05 two-tailed nonparametric test) to examine fertility intention group differences on each of the proposed predictor characteristics as well as follow-up contrast tests and Mann-Whitney pairwise comparisons with adjusted experimental-wise error rates for one-sided hypothesis tests.

Additional analyses will include one-way and two-way layouts of parametric and nonparametric statistics (e.g., median polish and Kruskal-Wallis tests, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), Chi-Square statistics).

References

Bowlby, J. (1982). *Attachment and Loss* (vol.1). USA: Basic Books.

Pol, L.G. (1983). Childlessness: A panel study of expressed intentions and reported fertility. *Social Biology*, 30, 318-327.

Table 1: Potential Routes to Fertility “Decision-Making” and Related Outcomes*

Type	Outcome	Characteristic Pattern	Reasons/ Description**
Deciders & Maintainers (Active Decision Making)	Voluntary Childlessness	Early Decision → V.C. Adults (prior to union; by early 20s)	Parented experiences; deidentification with same-sex parent; parentification; disinclination toward children
		Late Decision → V.C. Adults (late 20s –30s)	Child conflicts with lifestyle preferences; partnership demands; career
	Parenthood	I.V. Adults → [Adoption/ Medical interventions] → Parenthood	Pronatalist beliefs
		Planned Pregnancy → Childbearing → Parenthood (includes on-time & off-time)	Deliberate teenage childbearing as an escape; transition to adulthood; complete family structure; pronatalist values
Deciders & Switchers (Active Decision Making)	Voluntary Childlessness	Intend children → Intend childless → V.C. Adults	Career and partner effects; lifestyle preference changes; discover infecundity and decide against interventions
	Parenthood	Intend childless → Intend children → Parenthood	Partner effects; social and familial pressures; career and lifestyle changes
Perpetual Postponers (Passive Decision Making)	Voluntary Childlessness	Series of “not the right time” assessments → [aging] → V.C. Adults	People who continually make the “not the right time “ for children and/ or marriage assessment of their lives. When they are ready to make a decision, age makes parenthood undesirable or improbable; no clear preference for or against having children.
Uncertains (Passive Decision Making)	Voluntary Childlessness	Not certain about childbearing preferences → contraceptive use → V.C. Adults	Law of Inertia; No clear preference for or against having children
	Parenthood	Not certain about childbearing preferences → not against having children → Parenthood	Status quo; No clear preference for or against having children; partner may want children and is responsible for contraception ; series of indecisions for youthful and adult childbearers

* Given lack of empirical evidence or research addressing processes presented in the table, patterns, reasons, and descriptions are not comprehensive and are open to suggestions.

** Determinants may differ according to the different types of patterns.

Figure 1: Models of Change versus Stability for Childless Subgroups

