

Extended abstract for the presentation at the European Population Conference 2012, Stockholm, Sweden, topic 3, “Sexual and reproductive health”

What do they know? What do we know? Divergency in the partners’ statements on the couple’s contraception

Background and Research Questions

Widespread availability and use of contraception in contemporary Western societies offers the possibility to control fertility to a high degree. Within partnerships, it is a common medium to avoid pregnancy and to plan timing and spacing of fertility. Nevertheless, in demography and social sciences, contraception is rarely addressed from a couple perspective. Existing findings on contraceptive behaviour mainly are based on information mentioned by only one of the partners, in most cases the female partner. Only few studies provide information on contraception from both partners, giving insight into birth control practices within the couple (e.g. Severy/Silver 1993). Hence, ambivalence, misconceptions and ambiguities in the partnerships’ contraception are rarely analysed systematically on broad database. Starting on this point, the paper aims to provide a deeper insight into contraception from a dyadic point of view. As can be noticed (see section “first results”), in a comparatively high share of partnerships, divergency in the partners’ statements on the couples’ contraceptive practice occurs – one partner stating that precautions have been taken or taken regularly, the other one stating differently. The finding of discrepancy in every third partnership points in the direction that contraception in couples might not be the “sure thing”, that it is expected to be. With regard to this discrepancy, the paper pursues two general goals:

- analysing influencing factors on partners’ inconsistency in their information on contraceptive behaviour and
- describing outcomes of the different convergence-divergence-patterns.

Another aim of the paper is to analyse the disparity in the two different methodic approaches, comparing and contextualising findings of studies on contraception in partnerships that are based on one partner’s evaluation versus those from multi-actor-evaluation.

Hypotheses

It can be assumed that the information that is gained in single persons’ perspective surveys differs considerably from the information when both partners are included. Especially the use of contraceptive methods that offer control for both partners (e.g. condom) seems to be underestimated when relying on the evaluation of only one partner. The share of those methods can be awaited to be higher when analysing their prevalence from the couple perspective.

Regarding the consistency in the statements on consequent application, it can be assumed that correspondency in the statements is positively related to a) the partnership duration and b) the fertility history of the couple. It is also presumed that c) with a higher homogeneity of the partners in socio-economic regards, the smaller the divergency.

Focusing on the outcomes in a longitudinal perspective, for couples using contraception, a positive correlation between divergence and childbirth can be expected, while the share of couples who congruently report on their contraception becoming parents is lower.

Severy, Lawrence J./Silver, Starr E. (1993): Two reasonable people: Joint decision making and contraceptive choice and use. In: Severy, Lawrence J. (ed.): Advances in population. Psychological perspectives, vol. I. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, pp. 207-227.

Data and Method

In the annual German representative „Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics (*pairfam*)“, manifold data on personal relationships and family development are surveyed in a multi-actor-design – the anchor person and partner are surveyed separately from each other to the same topics.

The original sample consists of persons aged 15-17, 25-27 and 35-37 with N=12,402 participants. The paper focuses on the two older age groups to cover persons in a relevant family starting phase, and their partners. The first two waves 2008/9 and 2009/10 are used to give insight in a longitudinal perspective and especially to analyse outcomes of certain contraceptive patterns.

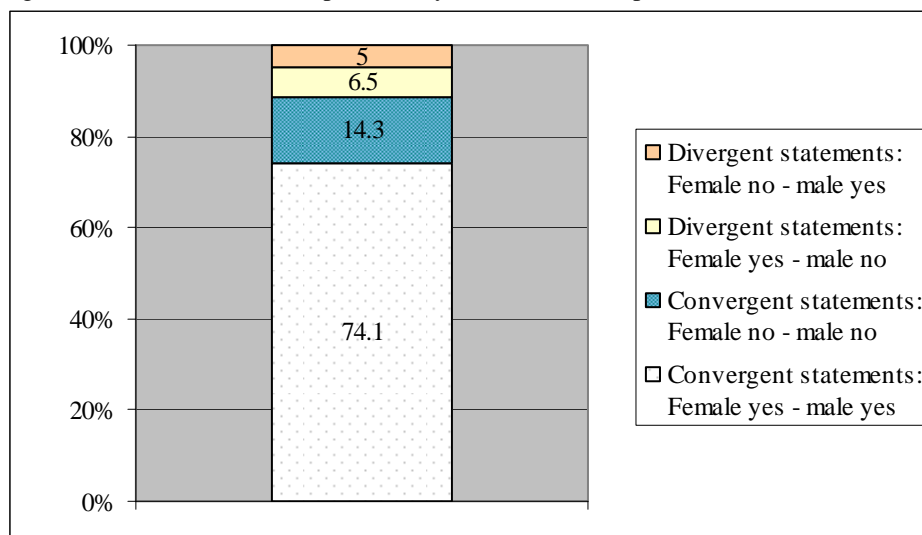
The findings of bivariate analyses are compared to existing findings from studies which reconstruct contraception in partnerships by using information of only one person (e.g. BZgA 2011), aiming for a contextualisation of the different procedures of surveying. In addition, multivariate analyses based on *pairfam*-data are calculated to replicate influencing factors on convergence and divergence on couples' contraception information (and behaviour) and its outcomes.

A differentiated typology of convergence-divergence-patterns is developed by a cluster analysis.

First results

Figure 1 depicts the distribution of the statements on general use of contraception within couples in the previous three months by comparing the answers of the female and the male partner. In nearly three out of four couples, both partners state having used contraception, while 14.3% report they were not taking precautions. Interestingly, the couples' statements do not match in 11.5% of the couples, i.e. one of the partners is answering „yes“ and the other one „no“ when they are asked if the couple has been using contraception. This finding indicates that discrepancy in the knowledge about the couples' contraceptive behaviour is of certain importance.

Fig. 1: Statements on contraceptive use (yes/no) within couples (in %)



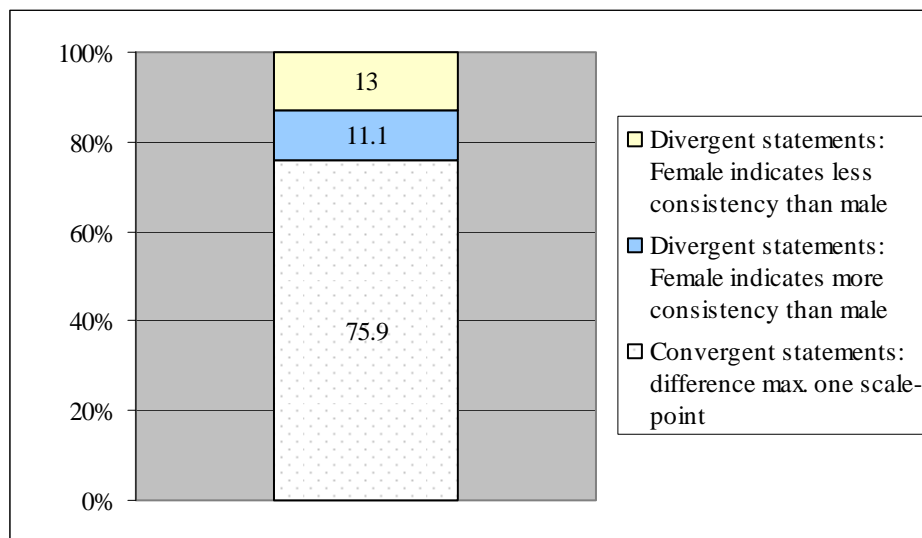
Source: *pairfam* 2008/2009; N=2,290 couples, weighted data; own calculations.

Item: Did you or [name partner] use some form of contraception in the past three months?

Obviously, each contraceptive method offers specific characteristics regarding the possibilities of control and recognition of use, which can differ by sex. Condom use, for example, can be recognised by both partners and offers a certain degree of control for the male partner, while oral contraception offers only sparse control to the male partner, whereas the female partner is in full control. Nevertheless, the sexes offer a corresponding response: 80.6% of the female and 79.1% of the male partners, respectively, state that contraception was used.

Divergence cannot only be observed when analysing statements on contraceptive behaviour in general, but when focusing on the consistence of use, too. When looking at only those couples, who were in agreement using contraception, it seems promising to ask how consequently, in the eyes of the partners separately, they did apply their contraceptive.

Fig. 2: Statements on consistency of contraception within couples using contraception (in %)



Source: pairfam 2008/2009; N=1,623 couples, weighted data; own calculations.

Item: How consistently did you [respondents with partner: or [name partner]] use contraception? 5-point likert scale (1: Very inconsistently, 5: Very consistently)

As illustrated in figure 2, in nearly one out of four couples who correspondingly indicated on using contraception, the partners respond divergently on the consistency of their practice, indicating that in these partnerships, the knowledge about the couple's own contraception is not clear. Even when controlling for several essential factors (e.g. contraceptive method, age) the findings of discrepancy remain robust, pointing into the direction that we are dealing with a general phenomenon. This uncertainty in knowledge might go along with implications on fertility and fertility research as well, re-thinking the reliability of singular persons' evaluation of contraceptive use.

The first findings presented here indicate the relevance of discrepancy in terms of contraception within couples, with on the whole around every third couple showing divergency. Differentiated analyses of the contexts and consequences offer promising insight into perspectives of fertility in partnerships that have been widely unattended up to now.