

**Partners' Fertility Intentions:
A Note of Discord and Inconsistent Contraceptive Use**

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It may sound like a truism to say that we should consider partners, not just individuals, when studying fertility choices. In practice, however, this truism is frequently forgotten as we analyze childbearing intentions and behavioral outcomes of individuals – mostly females. Studies on fertility that involve couple's perspective are still scarce, mostly due to a low availability of adequate data. Nonetheless, some attempts to understand fertility intentions and reproductive behavior at the couple's level have been taken (e.g.: Miller 1981; Beckman 1984; Thomson, McDonald et al. 1990; Corijn, Liefbroer et al. 1996; Thomson 1997; Thomson and Hoem 1998; Miller, Severy et al. 2004; Jansen and Liefbroer 2006; Rosina and Testa 2009; Testa 2010). Although faced with various methodological challenges, the researchers explored sources of partners' disagreement in childbearing attitudes and intentions, discussed power relations in a couple in case of such disagreements and suggested several possible mechanisms of how the final decision about childbearing is made (e.g.: power rule, sphere of interest rule or golden rule).

The lack of partners' unity in a sphere of reproduction leads to postponement of childbearing and therefore researchers find it crucial to explain why disagreement occurs and how it is resolved. Until the agreement is reached – no active steps towards having a child are taken. With the current study, we take a closer look into the stage when no agreement between partners has been reached yet. We apply qualitative approach to

explore couple dynamics in a case of different childbearing desires and intentions of the partners.

We analyze data on 23 young, Polish couples (age of female partners varied from 20 to 30). In-depth interviews with male and female partners (separately) were conducted in Warsaw in 2004 and 2005. In our sample, 16 couples were childless and seven had one child. The couples differed in respect to their marital status: there were 13 married and six cohabiting couples, in four cases, the partners were “living-apart-together”. The respondents were also of different status in the labor market and educational attainment, although in the vast majority of cases they were medium to highly educated.

Each interview contains rich data on interviewees’ experiences, expectations and opinions related to childbearing. In particular, all respondents were asked numerous, detailed questions about their (past or current) desires and intentions to have a child. They were asked to report on their partner’s desires and intentions as well and to describe any discussions they might have had on the topic. The interview guideline included also questions on contraceptive use and proceptive behaviors.

We start our analyzes by grouping couples in our sample according to their childbearing intentions and reproductive behavior. For all childless couples, we consider the intentions for parenthood expressed during the interviews by both partners, and we check to see whether they agree or disagree on that issue. Further, we examine whether intentions are accompanied by adequate reproductive behaviors; in particular, we analyze whether the respondents make any attempts at having children, or whether they use any form of contraception. For the respondents who are already parents, we use retrospective information and reconstruct the situation as it was before the woman became pregnant.

We identify six main categories of couples, with each category characterized by different combinations of intentions and behaviors. In the next step, we explore the ways in which the respondents in each category speak about their childbearing choices and negotiations on the topic with their partners. We also reconstruct their life-situations: relationship status and quality, partners’ situation in the labor market, their housing conditions, financial resources, and so forth.

We find that some level of partners’ disagreement, related to family planning occurred in about half of the couples. Moreover, our analyzes show that under some circumstances a note of discord in couples’ intentions may lead to an inconsistent use of contraception and hence increase a probability of pregnancy. Namely, such situation takes

place in case of married couples, who have basic material conditions for childbearing secured (in respondents' opinion), when one partner strongly desires to have a child and he or she wants to have it as soon as possible. Our data reveal that in these cases, even if the other partner does not express similar childbearing intentions and the joint decision to start trying for a child is not reached, the couple consciously changes their contraceptive behaviour. They switch to less reliable methods and seem to start "running the risk" of an "accidental" pregnancy. We also show that the arguments behind these processes may differ, depending on whether it is a woman or a man, who is more interested in parenthood.

Altogether, our study provides valuable insights into the couple's dynamics and into reproductive consequences of partners' disagreement on fertility intentions. We show that it is not necessary for the partners to reach the agreement on the issue in order to conceive. Partners may consciously increase a probability of pregnancy even though their disagreement does not allow them to take active steps towards childbearing. In such cases, some postponement of childbearing can be observed, but a child is likely to be conceived before the partners reach an agreement on their fertility intentions.

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