

Are you ready for a child? Mixing methods to understand fertility intentions

Isabella Buber and Katrin Fliegenschnee

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Authors

Isabella Buber is a Research Scientist at the Vienna Institute of Demography of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Email: isabella.buber@oeaw.ac.at

Katrin Fliegenschnee is a Research Scientist at the Vienna Institute of Demography of the Austrian Academy of Sciences. Email: katrin.fliegenschnee@oeaw.ac.at

Contact information for corresponding author

Isabella Buber
Vienna Institute of Demography
Austrian Academy of Sciences
Wohllebengasse 12-14, 6th floor
A-1040 Vienna
Email: isabella.buber@oeaw.ac.at

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Are you ready for a child?

Mixing methods to understand fertility intentions

Abstract

Combining qualitative and quantitative methods and using a mixed method approach is rarely done in demography. The current paper aims to better understand the concept of fertility intentions with regard to family formation. During problem-centred interviews with childless men and women, not only economic circumstances but also the issue of feeling ready was argued as being crucial for the decision to have a child. Based on these qualitative results, additional questions were included in the Austrian “Generations and Gender Survey” (GGS) which allow to analyse the dimension of being ready also quantitatively in a national representative dataset. Our quantitative results revealed that the feeling of being ready has additional explanatory power for childbearing intentions among childless men and women in Austria.

Keywords

Fertility intentions, mixed methods, triangulation, Theory of Planned Behaviour, Austria, GGS

1 Introduction

Reality is considered to be too complex to be captured by one single method (Freshwater, 2007), a combination of qualitative and quantitative data is regarded to “yield a more complete analysis” (Creswell et al., 2004, p. 7). Especially family formation processes and fertility decisions can be described as complex: Demographic characteristics, socioeconomic and individual aspects, societal norms as well as attitudes are crucial for fertility plans and decisions. Research on fertility has been mainly using quantitative methods, and only in the last decades, qualitative research methods have become more accepted in demography (e.g. Bernardi, 2003; Bernardi et al., 2007; Settersten, 2007; Rille-Pfeiffer, 2009; Borchardt & Stöbel-Richter 2004; Bernardi et al., 2008; Keim et al., 2009; Von der Lippe, 2010). Blossfeld and Huinink (2001, p. 10) have argued that ‘soft’ data are often missing which could help to better understand the intention towards fertility. They indicate that a combination of qualitative and quantitative research might help to better understand life cycle events. Using a mixed methods approach, the current paper analyses childbearing decisions taken by childless men and women in Austria. We study the feeling of being ready as a determinant for childbearing decisions as well as its impact on childbearing intentions.

Some researchers have mentioned the aspect of being ready for a child, but typically address the issue when discussing quantitative or qualitative results (e.g. Blossfeld & Huinink, 2001; Settersten, 2007). To our knowledge, this aspect has never been addressed explicitly in family research. During problem-centred interviews with childless men and women in Vienna on family plans, partnership and further related aspects, the issue of feeling ready was mentioned again and again. It turned out that apart from economic circumstances, this individual aspect is important for the decision to have a child (XXX, 2006a). Based on these qualitative results, additional questions were included in the Austrian “Generations and Gender Survey” (GGS)

which allowed analysing the dimension of being ready also quantitatively in a national representative dataset. For the interpretation of the quantitative results we benefited from the knowledge of the qualitative findings.

2 Theoretical background

The current study focuses on the issue of readiness in the context of childbearing decisions to get a better understanding of fertility intentions. We assume that readiness is important for fertility intentions. Following recent literature on fertility intentions, the current analysis is embedded in the social psychological theory of planned behaviour (TPB) by Ajzen and Fishbein (Ajzen, 1988, 1991; Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005). This theory is particularly suitable for our research question since it aims to understand the mechanisms leading to a decision on the individual level.

The TPB was adapted to fertility and is implemented in the Generations and Gender Survey (GGS) (Vikat et al., 2007). Fundamental for the TPB is the assumption that the intention to perform a specific behaviour is the proximate antecedent of the behaviour itself. In the context of fertility, the intention to have a child can be seen as the proximate antecedent of having a child, which would be the act of behaviour.¹ The TPB has been recently used for analysing fertility decisions and intentions based on the GGS (e.g. Billari et al., 2009; Dommermuth et al., 2009; Klobas, 2010).

According to the TPB approach, intentions—in our case, fertility intentions—are described as being directly dependent on three conceptually independent determinants: attitudes towards the behaviour, social norms and perceived behavioural control. Background factors (e.g. individual factors such as personality, experiences, emotions or age) influence the construction of intentions via effecting attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005).

3 Empirical evidence

Some researchers have mentioned the aspect of being ready for a child (e.g. Blossfeld & Huinink, 2001; Settersten, 2007). Blossfeld and Huinink (1991) found that women postpone their entry into motherhood because of the normative expectation that they are ‘not ready’ for having a child when still rather young and in education. Miller and Pasta (1994, p. 232) argued that the most desirable item about the timing of children was “having a child when s/he by her/himself and the spouse is personally ready”.

The ongoing German panel survey PAIRFAM (Panel Analysis of Intimate Relationships and Family Dynamics) includes the aspect of being ready (Huinink et al., 2010), but to our knowledge this aspect has not been explicitly analysed so far. Although results based on a minipanel preceding this survey revealed that for women being ready is a relevant precondition for the intention to have a child within the next two years, the authors discuss mainly economic and structural aspects influencing the readiness. The emotional dimension of ‘being ready’ is not elaborated (Huinink et al., 2008; Maul et al., 2010).

Several qualitative studies emphasised the feeling of being mature enough to take over responsibility for children (e.g. Bernardi, 2003; Settersten, 2007; Müller-Burhop, 2008). In an investigation of the different types of social mechanisms responsible for the interdependence of couples' reproductive preferences, Bernardi (2003, p.528) cited a married couple who agreed on waiting until they "felt mature as a couple". Similarly, Settersten (2007) stated that for many people being mature and ready for a child was regarded as a requirement to become a parent. They concluded that many individuals postpone their fertility plans because they are aware of the responsibility of being a parent and they want to perform this role well. Moreover, Settersten (2007) underlined that individuals felt completely grown up when having entered parenthood. Having a child was regarded as a key element of adulthood. Regarding family formation, it turned out that for women preconditions are more relevant than for men. In particular, the readiness of the partner, financial safety and their own working conditions are important (Huinink et al., 2008). In the context of fertility intentions, Borchardt and Stöbel-Richter (2004) found in their qualitative research that some interview partners did not mention socio-economic determinants but talked about their own and their partner's development.

Being prepared might be regarded as related to being ready. In a recent qualitative study on Austria, Rille-Pfeiffer (2009) argued that women and men want to get prepared for having a child and want to have perfect conditions when entering parenthood. Additionally people want to make ideally a couple decision, which means that the partners have to agree about details.

Further studies have addressed fertility intentions in connection with the impact of perceived costs and rewards of having a child. Liefbroer (2005) examined the actual timing of entry into parenthood among Dutch young adults. The expected costs and rewards were found to influence the timing of parenthood among both women and men. Dommermuth, Klobas and Lappegard (2009) argued that attitudes towards children have no significant effect on the timing of a birth among childless individuals in Norway. Contrary to this finding, Billari, Philipov and Testa (2009) showed that attitudes, norms and perceived behaviour control are simultaneous determinants of fertility intentions in Bulgaria, even when background factors are controlled for. However, perceived behaviour control only mattered for second births. Both research papers found a very strong effect of subjective norms and significant others, especially for the first birth. Age was pointed out to have a strong effect on the timing of childbearing. Additionally it was noticed that women have stronger childbearing intentions than men (Dommermuth et al., 2009).

As we have shown, in the previous literature the aspect of readiness was discussed in the context of family formation, but to our knowledge, it has not been analysed comprehensively. The current paper focuses on this issue in more detail. Starting with qualitative methods, we elaborate the term 'being ready' and explain in which context childless men and women mention this aspect. Based on our qualitative results, we formulate research hypotheses which are tested in the quantitative part of our paper in a conceptual model based on the TPB.

4 Mixed method approach

Although the division between qualitative and quantitative research is entrenched in the core disciplines of social sciences, researchers have proposed ways to integrate the two approaches (Fielding & Fielding, 1986; Flick, 2004). Mixed methods research—bringing together ideas

from qualitative as well as from quantitative research (Johnson et al., 2007)—has become a third major research approach. Scientists have shown how quantitative and qualitative approaches complement each other and are increasingly using a combination of both methods (Denzin, 1989) to provide a more holistic view of a specific topic. Qualitative research can explore the logics of the subjects which can be compared with quantitative findings. Scholars argue that it is important not only to explain but also to understand the behavior of humans and that mixing methods increases the chance to do so. Social analysis can be done from the outside observer perspective—using quantitative methods—as well as from the inside individual acting perspective—using qualitative ones. Combining them will more likely lead to an explaining and understanding (Harrits, 2011).

Our mixed methods design focused on the family formation process. On the one hand, quantitative data generalise quantitative results, on the other qualitative data help to interpret, clarify, describe and validate the quantitative results (Johnson et al., 2007). We share the belief that mixing qualitative and quantitative methods will lead to a better understanding of the subject under research (Creswell & Garrett, 2008) and yield a comprehensive picture (Flick, 2006).

The use of a mixed methods approach emerged during our research. We started with a qualitative study and decided in the analysis process to expand our research by collecting and analysing also quantitative data in order to have a broader view on the issue of feeling ready in the fertility decision process. According to Creswell and Tashakkori (2007) our use of mixed methods corresponds to a practice perspective.

In our research we want to combine methodologies to study the same phenomena (Denzin, 1989). We used a sequential exploratory design, following Hanson's et al. (2005) classification. The starting point was a qualitative approach. Qualitative methods are “superior when one wishes to explore a topic more fully” (Begley, 1996, p. 122). One advantage of qualitative research is that people can talk about their behaviour and intentions in their own words, and explain them from their personal point of view (Kelle, 2001). Although, the results are limited to a rather small group that was under research, qualitative methods help to identify elements neglected so far in quantitative research thus implying further quantitative studies (Hanson et al., 2005). Out of the qualitative data, theoretical ideas and hypotheses were developed—in our case the issue of being ready for a child—and additional questions were included into the Austrian version of the GGS to allow further analyses with quantitative methods. We used descriptive statistics as well as probit regressions to test our hypotheses in the nationally representative GGS dataset and to see how the aspect of being ready is quantitatively reflected in the population. Moreover, we get a better understanding of the numeric results by referring to the details of the qualitative study (Hanson et al., 2005).

5 Qualitative research

5.1 Problem-centred interviews and sampling

The intention of our paper is to get a better understanding of how fertility intentions are generated. We used problem-centred interviews (Witzel, 2000). The following issues were discussed during the interviews: plans for family and children, partnership, interviewees'

families of origin, social networks as well as values, personal aims and the topic of fears and uncertainty. All interviews started with a narrative part. The guideline changed somewhat over the research. However, most of the participants were asked “When you think back how did the issue of having a child come up the first time?” After the narration immanent questions² were asked, followed by questions about topics that were not mentioned by the interviewed person but which were also necessary for the research (Lamnek, 1995; Mayring, 1990; Flick, 1995). People talked freely about their idea of having children, about what was important for them and what they considered as necessary to prepare. In a qualitative interview, the focus is on the interviewee and what s/he considers as important regarding the open question (Flick, 2006). Because interviewing and analysing are interlinked and not separated processes, the centre of interest changed over time, although the main topics remained the same.

During the whole project ‘theoretical sampling’ was used. Integration and publications as indicators of. All in all we conducted 21 interviews between 2005 and 2007. The interviewed persons were between 24 and 42 years old, childless and had been living with their current partner for at least three years. Twelve women and nine men (each a partner of one of the interviewed women) were interviewed. All participants were interviewed separately. Interviews lasted between 90 minutes and two hours. We started with more highly educated individuals and during the theoretical sampling process included also less educated respondents³.

5.2 Qualitative analysis

In this study the method of qualitative sequence analysis (Froschauer & Lueger, 1992) was linked with the coding principles of Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). Applying sequence analysis, we used ‘rough analysis’ to develop hypotheses which were checked and continuously reviewed. This method is used especially to detect important structural characteristics (Froschauer & Lueger, 1992). Considering Grounded Theory we worked with the coding principles of ‘open coding’, ‘axial coding’ and ‘selective coding’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). The main task in the analysing process was to develop categories and hypotheses.

Applying qualitative sequence analysis has the advantage that a certain number of hypotheses and ideas are already developed before starting with coding principles of Grounded Theory. While analysing with objective hermeneutic sequence analysis, small sequences⁴—which are units of interaction—are looked at to elaborate the ‘Gestalt’ (which means the shape or pattern) of the segment. Hypotheses are developed to explain structural aspects as well as the relation to the respondent’s environment. Rules or patterns of behaviour become visible which gives us information about the overall ‘meaning structures’ of the individual (Maiwald, 2005). Hypotheses about the social world as well as about the interview situation are formed and permanently reviewed during the analysing process (Froschauer & Lueger, 1992). During open coding small sequences are analysed by considering, for example, what the sequence is about, in which way an interviewee talks about an issue, which persons are mentioned, which issues are not mentioned. In this process, categories as well as a concept are developed which describe a phenomenon and its context. Similar elements are grouped together and by doing that, the categories become comprehensive. The categories change during the research process to reach conceptual density and to exceed the descriptive level (Strauss, 1991). During the process of axial coding, connections between the categories are made to develop linkages

between the different categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). The described qualitative approach is not a linear process but a circular one. This also holds true for the analysing process, where sequence analysis, open coding and axial coding were used alternately and not stepwise.

5.3 Results

The analyses of the qualitative interviews revealed that individuals have a vision about what their lives should look like in the future. These visions and ideas are very important for the fertility decision. The decision for a child will be made when the reality is rather close to the ideal picture of what one's life with a child should look like (XXX, 2006b).

Since attitudes toward behaviour, social norms and perceived behaviour control are crucial in the TPB, we want to point out that these issues were raised in our qualitative data. Our interviewees talked a lot about what consequences a child would bring about. The question of when to have a child, and how childless men and women perceive their role as mothers or fathers, were very strongly connected with social norms. In addition, all interviewees reflected their own financial situation. Those who seriously considered taking parental leave discussed their job in detail. By contrast, work was not an issue for males who did not consider the idea of staying at home with the child for some time. The job situation of the woman as future mother, however, was discussed by all participants. Although financial issues were mentioned, our findings indicate that they do not seem to be the most important issue when it comes to entering parenthood.

The preconditions and how they are perceived were regarded as important but they were not seen as the crucial element for entering parenthood.

Well, yes, I think, at the moment our preconditions (for having a child) would be rather good. (Mr. F, 28 years)

This person pointed out several times during the interview that even if the conditions would be found they would not want to have a child now. What turned out to be crucial was the feeling of being ready. This aspect was mentioned time and again and turned out to be one of the key elements when it comes to the decision for having a child. We concentrate now on this aspect and do not elaborate further the determinants of the TPB mentioned above. The issue of 'feeling ready' and feeling stable and settled enough to be a parent was mentioned with a lot of emphasis by nearly all interviewees. In our definition the concept of 'feeling ready' basically means that one has to be confident that it is the right decision at that particular point in time.

... because then we really want to get fully and deliberately involved and now both of us still are more or less in the phase of finding ourselves. (Mr. G, 29 years)

When becoming a parent people need to shift a lot of attention away from themselves towards someone else, i.e. the child (Settersten 2011). Several interviewed persons argued that they wanted to be stable and settled enough so that they can focus on this other person. The feeling to be emotionally ready to make such a step was perceived as very important.

... that you really want to have (children) and that you are prepared to spend time with the child and to invest emotionally (into the child). (Mrs. D, 34 years)

Readiness was often related to maturity and adulthood. To feel ready also means changing from youth to adulthood. Helfferich, Klindworth and Kruse (2005) also found that becoming a father was connected with being adult. When people talked freely about having a child they very often pointed out that they needed to be ready and mature to take over the new role of a mother or father.

... that you need to have an idea, meet certain standards, that you want to educate your children well and be a good father, and I thought I am not yet ready for that. (Mr. M, 33 years)

The older the interviewed persons were the more convinced they were of being mature. Nevertheless, the subjective age and the subjective feeling of being adult enough differed considerably. For example, one 24 year old man was fully convinced that he was already adult enough for having a child whereas another of 34 talked at length about not being ready yet. We have to point out that these two men had different social backgrounds, were living in different worlds so to say. Both needed to be grown up enough to have the feeling of being ready for such a step, to assume a new role and to be good in it. Regarding the notion of maturity, we again refer to a qualitative study on reproductive preferences by Bernardi (2003) who cited a highly educated Italian couple, married for seven years, aged 31 and 37 years, who agreed on waiting until feeling mature as a couple. This example further illustrates that the feeling of being mature is rather subjective and less dependent on objective age.

Throughout our interviews, the decision for a child was regarded as a couple's joint decision. In this context, the feeling to be ready as a couple is also important. It was perceived that both need the feeling that being a parent would fit into their lives.

One reason is that, at the moment, we simply do not yet see ourselves able to ... see ourselves as parents. (Mr. F, 28 years)

The emphasis on the dyadic perspective is in line with Burkart (1994) and a recent study by Rille-Pfeiffer (2009) who found that couples want to find the ideal point in time for both partners. In our current study it turned out that especially for women their own readiness as well as that of their partners was very important.

His sister asked us "when will you have a child". I didn't reply, you know, what should I say—Alex does not want to? (*laughs*). As for me, I am ready to have one anyhow. (Mrs. S, 30 years)

Whereas women strongly emphasised the couple perspective, for men the readiness of their female partner tended to be more important than their own. This is in line with Borchardt and Stöbel-Richter (2004) who argued that males concede more autonomy to women regarding the decision when to have a child. Also, Rille-Pfeiffer (2009) found in her research that women take the dominant part in the discussion about fertility timing. In other words, the word of the woman was described as a bit more important than that of the man.

But I clearly stated my views or wishes about this, and now it is up to her to decide. (Mr. V, 42 years)

It turned out clearly that the individuals not only reflected their own feelings but—quite intensively—also the situation of the other.

Several males reported that they were afraid of being unable to fulfil their own needs with a child. Another person, i.e. the child, would be at the centre of interest and reduce their own personal freedom.

... but also mature in the sense that you can shelve your own needs and lifetime wishes (when you have a child). (Mr. M, 33 years)

The idea that a child is associated with many sacrifices and that future parents have to be ready for this was mainly discussed by men. Women—especially younger ones—talked more about the fact that they wanted to experience several things before becoming a mother. They did not talk about sacrifices like men did.

The opinions of others were discussed with respect to the family formation process and the feeling of being ready. Recent studies showed that the influence of significant others is likely to have an effect on fertility intentions (Billari et al., 2009; Dommermuth et al., 2009). In the following quotation a woman refers to ‘other’ people than close ones. She argues that expectations of others who are emotionally not important to her, affect her feeling of being ready.

I think you need a thick skin, that others may think you are an uncaring mother if you do not stay at home the whole time (...).
I guess I am not ready for this, I have to cotton on to this idea so that I will have a thick skin at the time (when I have a baby). (Mrs. M, 27 years)

The feeling of being ready referred not only to personal aspects, but also to economic ones, including one’s own working and educational situation. This holds true for men as well as for women. Both need to be ready and to feel safe also economically to start a family.

He wants to finish his studies, he points out that he is not ready for such ideas before finishing his studies. (Mrs. S, 30 years)

Not only education but also other complex details need to be clear. To finish one thing means also to be ready for something new. To have a child is a very new part in life which means that many things should be finished and clarified before.

We illustrated what we understand by the concept of feeling ready. It is a rather complex issue with many elements. It includes confidence in being mature enough, to be ready to invest emotionally into a child, to be a good parent and therefore one has to be prepared. Not just one partner but the couple as such must be ready for such a step. When a child is there its needs are of utmost importance and other things have to be reduced, individual and personal needs of the parents taking a back seat. Having a child is regarded as something one must be ready for. Childless persons would often point out that they feel that others will judge them and the way they live their lives—therefore they want to prepare themselves for being a mother or a father. In addition to this rather emotional readiness, issues like finishing education and study courses were pointed out as well. For the interviewees it was rather difficult to talk about feeling ready because it is based on the feeling of being mature enough, which is a state of mind that is not clearly defined. Even if it is difficult to capture all aspects

of this personal feeling of being ready for a child, we incorporated that aspect in the Austria GGS to further elaborate it in a quantitative framework.

Based on our qualitative research, we formulate four hypotheses:

H 1: The feeling of being ready is an important determinant for fertility intentions.

H 2: The feeling of being ready is not gender-specific and perceived by men and women in the same way.

H 3: The feeling of being ready is more important for childbearing intentions than economic aspects.

H 4: The feeling of being ready has further explanatory power for childbearing decisions in the multifaceted framework.

6 Quantitative Research

6.1 Data

The quantitative part of the study is based on the Austrian “Generation and Gender Survey” (GGS), carried out in 2008/09. The current study uses information on 2,086 childless individuals (999 men and 1,087 women) aged 18 to 44 years who were able to conceive a child but did not expect one at the time of the interview and had consistent information on their childbearing intentions. Throughout the analyses, weights were applied (Buber, 2010). For reasons of data availability, research on fertility and family formation used to be focused on women, and only in the last few decades have studies also included men. The GGS allows profound analyses of the family formation process and the determinants of childbearing decisions among Austrian men and women.

The international GGS questionnaire includes questions on childbearing intentions as well as possible factors for childbearing decisions. With regard to childbearing intentions, three dimensions are captured, namely the intention to have a(nother) child (1) now, (2) within the next three years, as well as (3) the general intention to have a child, for those who do not want to have a(nother) child within the next three years. As intentions become more meaningful when the time remaining for their actual realisation is short and that time interval is specified (Philipov et al., 2006; Schoen et al., 1999), we follow the approach to concentrate on the intention to have a child within the next three years (e.g. Billari et al., 2009). In line with our qualitative data we focus on childless people. Intentions to have a first child are intentions to become a parent, whereas intentions to have a second or third child are affected by previous life-course experience regarding parenthood (Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995).

Apart from childbearing intentions, respondents were asked how much their decision on whether or not to have a(nother) child during the next three years depends on several factors.⁵ These factors include—among others—economic indicators (one’s financial situation, one’s own and the partner’s work situation) and partner-related aspects (having a suitable partner). These items were incorporated in the general GGS in the framework of the TPB, described in the previous section (see also Vikat et al., 2007), and they capture aspects of perceived behaviour control (see also Dommermuth et al., 2009; Klobas, 2010). Based on our qualitative results on childbearing behaviour (XXX, 2006a), additional individual aspects were included in the Austrian GGS which refer to the dependence of childbearing decisions on: (1) the feeling of being ready for a child, (2) the partner’s readiness for a child, and (3) the

feeling of being ready for a child as a couple. The quantitative study focuses on the importance of readiness as well as on various other aspects for fertility intentions and on how they possibly influence fertility decisions.

6.2 Results

The basic demographic characteristics indicate that our sample includes rather young adults. Two out of three childless persons were under the age of 30, the men's mean age being slightly higher than the women's (27.5 versus 26.7 years) (Appendix Table A1). In our sample, only 22% were living with a partner, one out of three had a partner without sharing the household (i.e. living apart together, LAT), and a substantial proportion reported no partner (45%). Childless men more often had no partner (50%) than childless women (39%). The interviewed childless women were more highly educated than their male counterparts, with 23% of the women (and 15% of the men) holding a tertiary degree (ISCED 5+6).

In a first descriptive analysis, we addressed the importance of 'being ready' among childless Austrian men and women. We find substantial high agreement towards the importance of being ready for childbearing decisions (Figure 1). The three items on readiness additionally included in the Austrian GGS were ranked as important determinants by roughly eight out of ten childless men and women. The respondent's and the partner's feeling of being ready for a child and especially the couple as a unity being ready for a child were regarded as crucial for fertility decisions (80% of men and 85% of women).

[Insert Figure 1 about here]

Our descriptive analyses reveal gender-specific differences regarding the feeling of being ready. Women considered readiness more often than men to be a strong determinant for their childbearing decisions. In addition, we find that whereas for men the partner's readiness is more important than their own feeling of being ready, for women being ready as a couple is slightly more important than their personal feeling, or their partner's feeling of being ready. These findings match with the qualitative results. However, both sexes clearly consider the decision for a child to be a couple's decision. As expected, the three included items on the feeling of being ready show a high correlation, with a factor ranging from 0.80 to 0.89 among men and women. In the remaining part of our quantitative analysis, we concentrate on only one aspect of being ready, namely on the feeling of being ready as a couple, since the three items of being ready are highly correlated and since it is the aspect with the highest approval.

A suitable partner tends to be less often ranked as a crucial determinant for fertility decisions than the aspect of being ready. Almost eight out of ten childless women and men answered that a suitable partner determines to a great deal or quite a lot the decision for or against a child. The evaluation of a suitable partner correlates with the items of being ready with a coefficient ranging from 0.50 to 0.56.

According to our descriptive results, economic factors like one's own financial situation or the own work are less often crucial for childbearing decisions than the feeling of being ready (Figure 1). For roughly four out of ten women and men, the decision to have or not to have a child in the near future depends to a great deal or quite a lot on their own financial situation. Again, we find substantial gender-specific differences, especially regarding the importance of

the own work. In general, women more often attach importance towards economic factors as compared to men.

In a further descriptive analysis we explore the association between readiness and perceived behaviour control on the one hand and age on the other (Figure 2). The issue of being ready as well as a suitable partner remain highly important throughout the mid-thirties and decrease only in the 35-44 age group, whereas external factors referring to material control lose importance in the decision process. Although the feeling of being ready as a couple and a suitable partner are less often regarded as important in the decision-making process of childless persons in their late thirties and early forties, these two dimensions remain the most frequently cited determinants. For example, for roughly two out of three childless men and women aged 40 to 45 years the childbearing decision still depends “to a great deal” or “quite a lot” on the feeling of being ready as a couple and on a suitable partner, whereas one’s own work and financial situation lost importance for the decision-making process. Economic aspects are more important at younger ages, their relevance in the decision process decreases substantially with age.⁶

[Insert Figure 2 about here]

To sum up, our descriptive analyses indicate that the feeling of being ready and personal as well as material have an impact on the decision process for a child. Interestingly enough, the additionally included feeling of being ready, but also personal control are more often than economic or health-related aspects seen as crucial in the decision process for or against a child within the near future.⁷

In a next step, we analyse the aspect of being ready in a multivariate setting and link the feeling of being ready with fertility intentions. As described above, we included the importance of being ready for individual childbearing intentions. Unfortunately, we did not ask whether the respondent (the partner and—if appropriate—the couple) actually felt ready for a child. Nevertheless, we want to find out, whether readiness does add something from an empirical point of view in a multivariate setting. Analyses were run for the overall sample including all childless persons as well as for men and women separately to explore possible gender differences (Table 1).

For the multivariate setting, childbearing intentions within the next three years is the dependent variable of interest. Using a probit regression model, the intention to definitely or probably want to have a child within the next years was opposed to the intention to definitely or probably not want to have a child within this time span. In total, 37% wanted to have a child within the next three years, varying between 61% among those living with a partner, 40% among men and women living apart together with their partner and 24% for those who had no partner at the time of the interview.

First, we included only the importance of being ready as a couple and found a highly significant association with childbearing intentions (Table 1, Models 1). The estimated coefficients are of about the same size for the overall sample, the female sample as well as the male sample (0.25; 0.29 and 0.22 respectively).

Second, demographic aspects relevant for childbearing intentions such as age and partner status and sex, as well as norms, attitudes and aspects perceived behaviour control—derived from the TPB—were added as control variables (Table 1, Models 2). As mentioned earlier,

the conceptual framework of our quantitative study is based on the TPB. Following Billari, Philipov and Testa (2009) and Dommermuth, Klobas and Lappegard (2009), we applied factor analysis to reduce the set of observed variables referring to norms and attitudes and generated three factors which are in line with results based on Bulgarian (Billari et al., 2009) and Norwegian data (Dommermuth et al., 2009). For details on the factor analysis we refer to Table A2 in the Appendix.

As expected, age and partner status are relevant for childbearing plans. The intention to start a family in the near future is highest among childless persons in their early thirties and lowest in early adulthood (Table 1, Models 2). Whereas childless men in the 40-45 age group still have comparably high intentions for family formation, childless women of the same age group have significantly lower childbearing intentions than younger ones. Our results confirm the well-known influence of partner status on childbearing intentions within the near future. Especially those without a partner have significantly low childbearing intentions. In the state of living apart together, family formation intentions are attenuated among men as compared to those living with the partner in the same household. Among women, on the other hand, those not sharing the household with their partner do not indicate significantly lower childbearing intentions compared to cohabiting women. We might conclude that living apart together does not hinder the family formation plans of childless women in Austria, but it does for men. In the overall model we find that childless women significantly more often want to start a family within the next three years compared to men (Table 1, Model 2a).

The factors capturing norms and positive as well as negative attitudes are highly significant for childbearing intentions. Therefore, our results support the TPB in the context of childbearing intentions. Let us now turn to the different aspects of behavioural control. In the overall model including men and women (Table 1, column 1), one's own work and a suitable partner are aspects of perceived behaviour control which are significantly associated with the intention to have a child in the near future. Analyses run separately for men and women reveal gender-specific differences. The descriptive finding that among women the respondent's own work situation was more often regarded as important for childbearing decisions than among men is confirmed in the multivariate framework. Moreover, in the multivariate model, the importance of a suitable partner significantly influences the childbearing intentions of childless women but not so for childless men.

In the multivariate setting the couple's feeling of being ready remains a significant determinant for childbearing decisions. The estimated coefficient is 0.24 and significant at the 5% level (Table 1, Model 2a). It indicates that childless persons who answered that the feeling of being ready for a child was important for their decision to have one more often wanted to become parents within the next three years as opposed to those who argued that readiness was not crucial for their childbearing decisions. Therefore, our results support hypothesis 1: the feeling of being ready is a determinant for fertility intentions.

Gender-specific calculations reveal an association between childbearing intentions and readiness of similar magnitude (female sample: 0.29; male sample: 0.23), significant at the 10%. Therefore we have to reject hypothesis 2: that the feeling of being ready is not gender-specific but perceived in the same way by men and women.

Although our descriptive results reveal that the feeling of being ready is more often seen as an important determinant for fertility decisions, we find in the multivariate framework that it is less important for childbearing intentions than economic aspects.⁸ The estimated coefficients

for one's own work are larger in magnitude and have a higher statistical relevance (overall sample and female sample). Therefore, we have to reject hypothesis 3: that the feeling of being ready is more important for childbearing intentions than economic aspects.

Since the estimated coefficient for readiness is significant in the multivariate model including demographic characteristics as well as norms and attitudes and perceived behavioural control, our results support hypothesis 4: that the feeling of being ready has further explanatory power for childbearing decisions in the multifaceted framework.

[Insert Table 1 about here]

7 Discussion

We analysed fertility intentions by using a mixed method approach. Starting with a qualitative approach we developed the idea that the issue of feeling ready for a child is a crucial element for fertility decisions. Readiness is considered to be mainly an emotional state of mind and refers not only to the individual itself but also to the partner and to the couple as a unity. We argue that fertility intentions are driven also by emotional aspects and not only by economic factors, which have achieved a preponderance in demographic studies on fertility. Emotional factors like the feeling of being ready are often neglected but might broaden the understanding of the family formation process and fertility behaviour.

To our knowledge, the feeling of being ready has so far not been explicitly addressed with regard to the family formation process and fertility intentions. According to the results presented by Huinink et al. (2008) on childless men and women in Germany, "being personally ready" as well as "the partner has to be ready" are important preconditions for having a child and significantly associated with women's childbearing intentions. Only recently, Huinink and colleagues stated that "questions of why and when partners do or do not feel ready for children have yet to be answered" (Huinink et al., 2010, p. 10). Other qualitative studies mention the importance of the aspect of 'being ready' as well (Settersten, 2007; Bernardi, 2003; Rille-Pfeiffer, 2009). Unfortunately, the authors do not further discuss this aspect.

We want to point out that the feeling of being ready is rather complex and describes something additional than only the sum of all circumstances. For example, some individuals considered their conditions as good, however they still were not ready for a child. Previous studies have shown that individuals who have not ideal conditions postponed fertility, but when time passes they start having children, even if the conditions remain the same (Engstler & Lüscher, 1991). These results might indicate that neither the requirements and conditions per se, nor the sum of its parts are the issue but that the feeling of being ready for a child is crucial, because when someone is ready for a child, the conditions seem to lose their importance.

The feeling of being ready is highly normative and connected to the "right" age. In our qualitative interviews interviewees narrated a lot about right and wrong behavior regarding childbearing. To feel ready to have a child and to act responsible was seen as an important reason to perform parenthood well and this picture of a good parent was certainly formed by social norms.

The current paper uses a mixed method approach to better understand the family formation process. Based on qualitative interviews, we extracted the aspect of being ready and explained the concept of being ready. Using quantitative methods, we analysed the dimension of being ready in a national representative dataset. Although our descriptive results revealed that readiness and a suitable partner were more often regarded as important determinants in the childbearing decision process than economic aspects, the preponderance of these individual factors was not confirmed by multivariate analyses. Although significant at a lower level, the feeling of being ready remains crucial for childbearing intentions. In our study we focused on the transition to parenthood, i.e. on the first child

Mixed methods research is regarded to create a holistic view of a phenomenon (O’Cathain et al., 2007, Hanson et al., 2005) and to reveal insights that are not deducible when using one method only, so that the end product is more than the sum of its parts (Bryman, 2007). We believe that this is the case in our study. From the qualitative research we derived the idea that readiness is important for family formation, so far neglected in the literature. Quantitative results confirm that it is an additional factor for many individuals in the fertility decision. In using both methods we are able to generalize results from a small qualitative sample to a random population sample and get a deep understanding of the phenomenon of being ready. Moreover, qualitative research reveals the complex notion and the situational context of being ready which is important for interpreting numerical results.

Two limitations have to be mentioned. First, our qualitative analysis is based on childless persons who had been living with a partner for at least three years, whereas the quantitative analysis includes childless individuals regardless of their partner status. However, we ran our analyses only for those cohabiting with a partner. It turned out that the results based on this group were similar to the overall group of childless people. The magnitude of the estimated coefficient for the feeling of being ready as a couple was even more pronounced. In our quantitative analysis we included all childless men and women and controlled for the partner status in order to keep the sample as large as possible.

Second, in the quantitative survey we did not ask directly if respondents—and if appropriate, their partner or the couple as a unity—felt ready for a child. Therefore, we were not able to directly link the feeling of being ready with fertility intentions as understood in the TPB.

Based on the current study we would encourage future surveys on fertility to include not only readiness as a determinant of fertility intentions but also to ask directly whether respondents are ready or not for a child. Fortunately, the issue of being ready is currently included in the generic questionnaire of the future third wave of the GGS. With the implementation of additional items in the second wave of the Austrian GGS which will be carried out in 2012, we will be able to further analyse this aspect of ‘being ready’.

We provided a deeper insight in the feeling of being ready for a child within the context of family formation. Even if the quantitative data do not allow to measure all aspects mentioned in the qualitative study, our paper shows that blending qualitative and quantitative methods can definitely enrich demographic and family research. The current study was characterised by intensive and fruitful collaboration between a qualitatively and a quantitatively oriented researcher, which was very interesting and enlarged both co-authors’ horizons. From our point of view, using different data and methods is a valuable and promising innovative approach which should be considered for future research.

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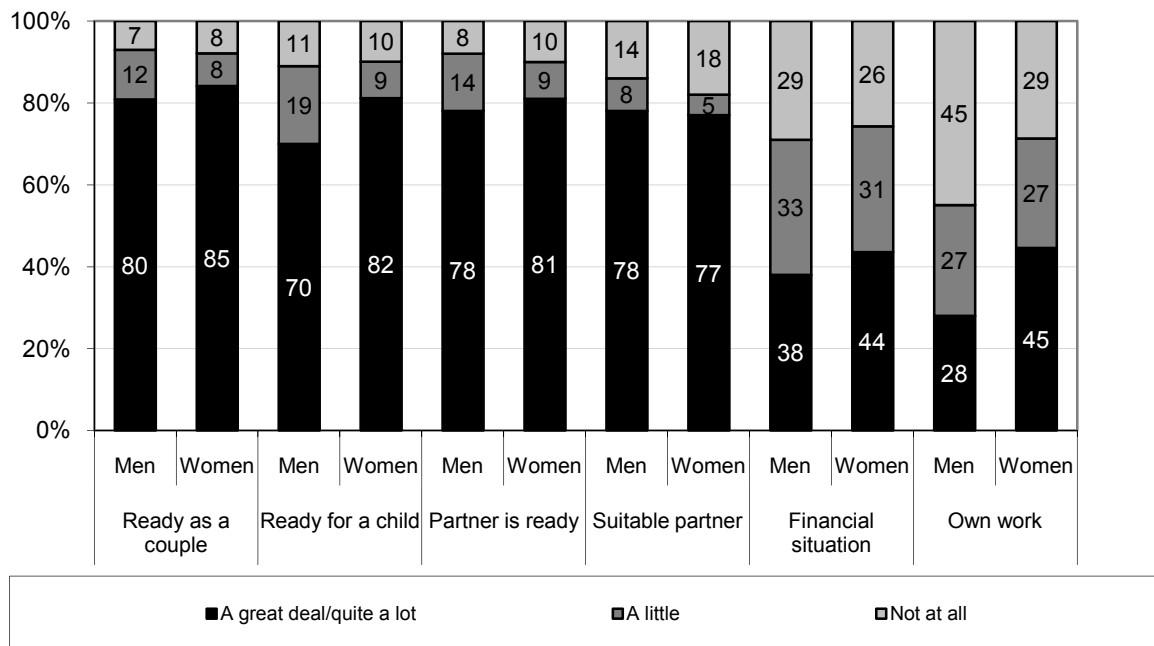
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Figure 1
Dependence of childbearing decision on selected factors

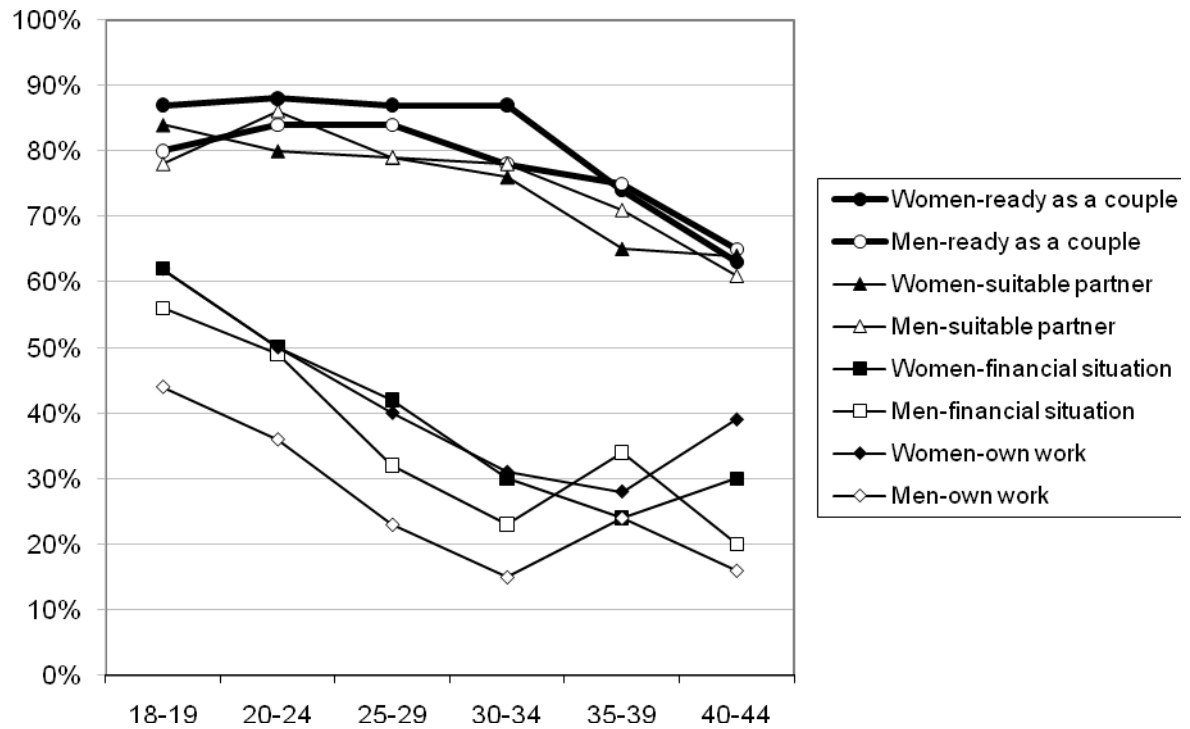


Source: Austrian GGS 2008/09; weighted data; N = 2,086 childless persons

Remark: The question on partner's work was posed to all persons, i.e. also to those who had no partner at the time of the interview.

Figure 2

Importance of selected factors for childbearing decision by age groups



Source: Austrian GGS 2008/09; weighted data; N = 2,086 childless persons

Remark: Percentage of persons for whom the selected factors determines to “a great deal” or “quite a lot” the decision on whether or not to have a child within the next three years.

Table 1

Estimated coefficient for the intention to have a first child within the next three years, probit regression

| | All childless | | Childless women | | Childless men | |
|--|---------------|----------|-----------------|----------|---------------|----------|
| | Model 1 | Model 2a | Model 1f | Model 2f | Model 1m | Model 2m |
| Ready as a couple | 0.25*** | 0.24* | 0.29** | 0.29+ | 0.22* | 0.23+ |
| Age | | | | | | |
| 18-24 ^a | | 0 | | 0 | | 0 |
| 25-29 | | 0.65*** | | 0.81*** | | 0.55*** |
| 30-34 | | 0.83*** | | 1.01*** | | 0.71*** |
| 35-39 | | 0.56*** | | 0.69*** | | 0.53*** |
| 40-44 | | 0.07 | | -0.45+ | | 0.40* |
| Partner status | | | | | | |
| No partner | | -0.81*** | | -1.06*** | | -0.70*** |
| Living with a partner in same household ^a | | 0 | | 0 | | 0 |
| Living apart together | | -0.17+ | | -0.07 | | -0.28* |
| Sex | | | | | | |
| Male ^a | | 0 | | | | |
| Female | | 0.30*** | | | | |
| Factors of TPB | | | | | | |
| Norms | | 0.30*** | | 0.31*** | | 0.29*** |
| Negative attitudes | | 0.45*** | | 0.49*** | | 0.43*** |
| Positive attitudes | | 0.31*** | | 0.53*** | | 0.16** |
| Perceived behavioural control | | | | | | |
| Financial situation | | -0.02 | | 0.10 | | -0.18 |
| Own work | | -0.31*** | | -0.41** | | -0.15 |
| Suitable partner | | 0.28** | | 0.42* | | 0.20 |
| Partner's work | | 0.12 | | 0.26* | | 0.01 |
| Constant | -0.50*** | -0.90*** | -0.55*** | -0.80*** | -0.47*** | -0.72*** |
| Pseudo R ² | | | | | | |
| N | 2,077 | 2,024 | 1,081 | 1,049 | 996 | 975 |

Significance: + p<0.10; * p<0.05; ** p<0.01; *** p<0.001.

^a Reference category.

Remark: Education turned out to have no explanatory power in our model. We therefore did not include it in our final model presented here

Source: GGS Austria 2008/09, authors' calculations.

Appendix Table A1

Sample characteristics (in per cent)

| | All childless | Childless men | Childless women |
|---------------------------------------|---------------|---------------|-----------------|
| Age | | | |
| 18-24 | 44 | 41 | 47 |
| 25-29 | 23 | 23 | 23 |
| 30-34 | 14 | 15 | 12 |
| 35-39 | 11 | 12 | 10 |
| 40-44 | 8 | 8 | 8 |
| Partner status | | | |
| No partner | 45 | 50 | 39 |
| Living with partner in same household | 22 | 18 | 27 |
| Living apart together | 33 | 32 | 34 |
| Highest educational level | | | |
| ISCED 1+2 | 12 | 13 | 11 |
| ISCED 3 | 52 | 58 | 45 |
| ISCED 4 | 18 | 15 | 22 |
| ISCED 5+6 | 18 | 15 | 23 |
| N (total) | 1,086 | 999 | 2,086 |

Appendix Table A2

Factor loading and uniqueness of items of attitudes and norms

| | Factor 1: Norms | Factor 2: Pos. attitudes | Factor 3: Neg. attitudes | Uniqueness |
|--|--------------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|------------|
| Although you may feel that the decision to have a child is yours [...], it is likely that others have opinions about what you should do. [...] To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements | | | | |
| Most of your friends think that you should have a child. | 0.7867 | 0.1066 | 0.0123 | 0.3696 |
| Your parents think that you should have a child. | 0.8551 | 0.0343 | 0.1040 | 0.2569 |
| Most of your relatives think that you should have a child. | 0.8845 | 0.0620 | 0.0176 | 0.2134 |
| Suppose you will have a child during the next three years, how would this affect ... | | | | |
| The possibility to do what you want. | 0.2267 | 0.5784 | 0.1511 | 0.5912 |
| Your employment opportunities. | 0.0983 | 0.5229 | 0.1792 | 0.6848 |
| Your financial situation. | 0.0939 | 0.5466 | 0.1379 | 0.6734 |
| Your sexual life. | 0.0474 | 0.3912 | 0.1383 | 0.8256 |
| What people around think of you. | 0.2021 | 0.1212 | 0.3328 | 0.8337 |
| The joy and satisfaction you get from life. | 0.1893 | 0.3215 | 0.5650 | 0.5415 |
| The closeness between you and your partner. | 0.0049 | 0.2090 | 0.6051 | 0.5901 |
| The care and security you may have in old age. | -0.0027 | -0.0822 | 0.3322 | 0.8829 |
| The closeness between you and your parents. | 0.1251 | -0.0934 | 0.4157 | 0.8028 |

Remark: For several items, uniqueness (the percentage of variance for the variable that is not explained by the common factor) is rather high (0.80 to 0.88) indicating that the variable is not well explained by that particular factor. This is the case for several items. We nevertheless kept these items since sensitivity analyses in the multivariate model revealed no different results when excluding these items for the construction of factors. We followed the notation by Dommermuth and colleagues (2009) and named these three factors “norms”, “positive attitudes” and “negative attitudes”.

Notes

¹ As Billari, Philipov and Testa (2009, p. 443) point out, it may be questionable to see having a child as an act of behavior, “given the complex sequence of acts that separates the decision to have a child from actual childbearing.” The authors refer to the term proceptive behavior, contrary to contraceptive behavior. The main point of departure is that, in high-contraception societies, and especially in lowest-low fertility context, contraception is the default behaviour, and fertility behaviour can be seen as proceptive (Miller and Pasta 1995).

² Immanent questions are subsequent questions on topics raised by the respondents which require clarification.

³ The basis for sampling is theoretical sampling yielding not a random sample but one which is based on conscious decisions. Interviewees are chosen because of earlier theoretical considerations and because issues or ideas have come up during the research process (Lamnek 1995). Which persons will fit the study later on is decided during the research process and there are no restrictions from the beginning. The snowball sampling method was used.

⁴ Sequences can be whole sentences, parts of sentences or single words.

⁵ The exact wording is: “How much would the decision on whether or not to have a/another child during the next three years depend on the following.” Possible answers: (a) not at all, (b) a little, (c) quite a lot, (d) a great deal, (e) not applicable.

⁶ Our bivariate findings indicate that among childless women in their early forties, their own work becomes more important again. We might assume that these women have succeeded in setting up a working career until the age of forty which—at least for some of them—is difficult to combine with children.

⁷ We concentrate on childless individuals. Results not shown here revealed that the feeling of being ready is important for higher parities as well, although less pronounced.

⁸ This might be partly explained by the low variance of the variable “being ready”, as only a small group indicated that their decision of whether or not to have a child within the next three years depended only “a little” or “not at all” on the feeling of being ready.