

Does the match matches?

The effect of employment uncertainty on the gender difference between real and perceived couples' fertility intentions

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Introduction

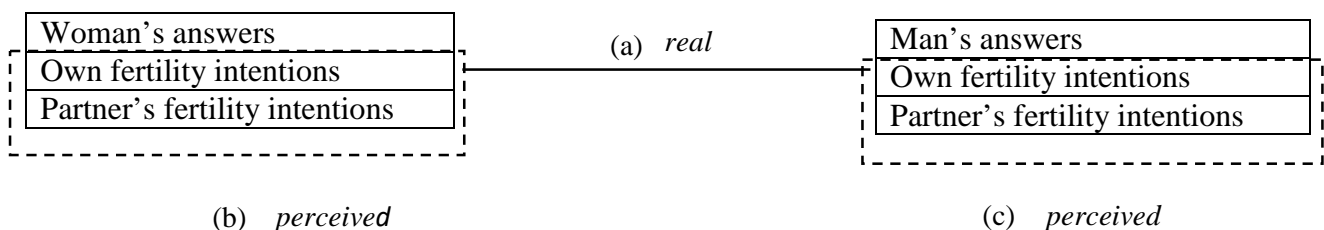
The importance of recognizing the couple perspective in the analysis of fertility intentions is well-established in demography (Ryder 1973). When possible, scholars work on both the members of the couple fertility intentions and disentangle the agreement or disagreement between the two (Bauer & Kneip, 2013; Cavalli & Rosina, 2011). Nonetheless, very often information from only one of the partners is collected (Morgan 1985; Testa 2010).

Reasons in favour or against having a child are debated between the partners to reach a common decision (Jansen & Liefbroer, 2006). There is considerable consistency in the responses of the partners, even if it depends on the parity (Berrington, 2004). However, having only one of the two respondents might be inaccurate because the respondent might be mainly guided by his/her point of view (Testa 2010): personal fertility intentions are much more influenced by the personal desire, rather than by the perception of the partner's desire (Morgan 1985).

In this study, we refer to *real* intentions (a) as the combination of the woman's and the man's answers on their own fertility intentions. *Perceived* fertility intentions are either those of the woman (b) and obtained from the combination of her answers about her own and the male partner's fertility intentions, or those of the man (c) and obtained from the combination of his answers about his own and the female partner's fertility intentions. Figure 1 exemplifies the patterns of connections at play.

The literature still misses an empirical confirmation that *real* couples' fertility intentions correspond to the *perceived* fertility intentions of the partners, and whether man's or woman's reporting on the partners' fertility intentions is reliable. Using the EU-FER¹ sample, that contains the information of self-declared (real) and partners' (perceived) fertility intentions of both the members of the couple, this article looks at within couple *real vs perceived* fertility intentions.

Figure 1. *Real* (solid line) vs *perceived* (dotted line) fertility intentions



¹ EU-FER is a ERC funded project. It has the aim of generating new knowledge on if, how, and under what circumstances economic uncertainty matters for fertility in contemporary Europe, adopting a cross-country comparative approach (www.eu-fer.com).

More specifically, we aim to explore whether it is more accurate the woman's or the man's perception of a couple's fertility intention. Moreover, the study is rooted in the current debate about the linkages between employment uncertainty and fertility. Hence, we additionally aim to test whether gender-specific combinations of employment uncertainty within couples might shape the *real* and *perceived* couples' fertility intentions declared by men and women differently.

Literature and research question

Fertility intentions have been generally regarded as a fairly suitable predictor of actual behavior at the individual level (Westoff & Ryder 1977; Rindfuss et al. 1988; Schoen et al. 1999). The literature distinguishes intentions by parity, considers age and partnership dynamics, includes a time frame for the realization of the intention, and assumes that the conditions at the time of interview, in particular a person's or couple's economic conditions, persist (Thomson 1997; Schoen et al. 1999; Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan 2003; Billari et al. 2009; Régnier-Loilier and Vignoli 2011; Balbo and Mills 2011).

People perceive fertility choices as joint couple decisions which justifies the analysis of jointly decided couple intentions (Morgan 1985). Nonetheless, the literature only partially explored the *real* vs *perceived* intentions of both the members of the couple to validate the best approach for a systematic study of couples' intentions.

Previous evidences on couples' fertility *real* vs *perceived* intentions show that: using only the information about the woman's couple perceived intentions might lead to an underestimation of disagreement, because women tend to inaccurately report men's discordant opinions (Stykes 2018). Hence, men's intentions may be a better proxy for couple intentions than women's ones (Stykes 2015). Clearly, having the information of only one of the members of the couple might lead to a bias in the measure of fertility intentions (Morgan 1985, Testa 2010).

Our first research question aims at comparing the *real* fertility intentions of the couple – expressed by the man and the woman personal fertility intentions – with the *perceived* intentions of both the members of the couple – measured as the personal real fertility intention and the perceived intention of the other member of the couple.

The literature has demonstrated that economic uncertainty is a powerful force in driving the individual fertility intentions (Vignoli et al., 2013; Modena et al., 2013; Hanappi et al., 2017). In demographic research, economic uncertainty has been so far viewed as an individual risk factor, mainly related to the labor market (e.g., unemployment, short-term contract jobs, underemployment, or a combination of these; Mills & Blossfeld 2013; Kreyenfeld et al.; Vignoli et al. 2012). A persistent experience of economic uncertainty may lead to the perpetual postponement of family formation and, as a result, to a smaller family size or even to no family at all (Busetta et al. 2019). Two demographic theories show that the effect of uncertainty on postponement is, however, still unclear. Uncertainty might lead to postpone fertility (and, hence, to a decline of short term fertility intentions) to less uncertain times (Ranjan 1999). On the other side, if a woman has limited opportunities in the labour market, she might be willing to invest in her family life and intending to have a child in the short run (Friedman et al 1994). This is especially possible if the man of the couple has a permanent employment position (Vignoli et al. 2012). The connection between fertility intentions and uncertainty in couples is, however, still partially unexplored. Previous research showed that, especially in traditional contexts where the male breadwinner role is still prevalent, the individual fertility intentions of the male of the couple are influenced by his labour market position, and they have a more important role in determining the intentions of the couple (Stein et al. 2014).

Our second research question aims at disentangling the role of man's and woman's economic uncertainty in shaping their perception of the couples' fertility.

We will extend the existing frameworks by allowing employment uncertainty to affect men and women in different, perhaps offsetting, ways. This insight is not novel in population studies, but models of fertility intentions and analyses of relationships between employment uncertainty and fertility tend to focus on either men or women in isolation. Our effort to incorporate gender-specific influences of employment uncertainty in explaining couples' *real vs perceived* intentions thus constitutes an innovation.

Data and method

We will use data retained from the EU-FER laboratory experiment on couples. The laboratory controlled experimental setting, took place at the University of Florence, Italy and at the University of Oslo, Norway. The sample of the respondents was composed by 800 heterosexual couples: both the members of the couple participated to the experiments. The members of the couples participated simultaneously, but in two different rooms. This study focuses on 266 couples (532 individuals) that represented the control group in the experimental setting, and were thus not exposed to any treatment. For this sample of convenience, the survey began with a question on their fertility intentions, measured with a scale that goes from 0 to 10 (Mynarska & Rytel, 2017). In the questionnaire also the perceived partner's fertility intentions were asked. Hence, for each couple we have four information: the woman's personal fertility intentions, her declaration of the partner's fertility intentions, the man's fertility intentions and his declaration of the partner's fertility intentions.

The survey also includes several information about employment status and characteristics of both the members of the couple. Namely, the current type of contract (permanent or temporary) or eventual unemployment condition; the perception of the level of instability of the actual labour market position; the duration of previous unemployment spells.

From the statistical point of view, we will rely on graphical models to provide us with a precise understanding, and a formal description, of the gender-specific combinations of partners' fertility intentions. Graphical model (Wright, 1921) are multivariate models that are useful for estimating and describing through visualization the relationship among variables. They were only rarely used in social sciences (eg. Mencarini et al. 2015; Berrington et al 2008). The method, while not materially different from more conventional ones, does provide a useful conceptual fit to the fertility intentions model illustrated in Figure 1, and facilitate its evaluation. We will show the discrepancy between *real* and *perceived* couples' fertility intentions by gender and assess whether employment uncertainty shapes the declaration of family formation plans.

Expected results

We will first focus on the couple's *real* fertility intentions. Then, we will look separately at women's and men's *perceived* couple fertility intentions and how much they differ from the *real* couple intentions. Finally, we will explore if and how the gender pattern of the distance between real and *perceived* fertility intentions is shaped by the economic uncertainty of both the members of the couple.

We expect that women's perceived fertility intentions are more accurate if there is a real agreement in the intentions to have a (further) child, while men's perception is more realistic in case of disagreement.

Furthermore, we expect that the employment uncertainty affects both the *real* and the *perceived* couple fertility intentions. It will differently have an impact on *real* couple intentions depending if the uncertain position is the one of the woman, the one of the man, or both. Additionally, we believe that also male and female *perceived* couple intentions will be diversely shaped, according to whether the employment uncertainty touches only the woman or the man or both the members of the couple.

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