

Expectations and Reality of Childbearing

Marion Burkimsher

The project described here firstly replicates (to some extent) the work by Myrskylä and Margolis (2014), although instead of looking at general life satisfaction (as that was not a question asked in the Generations and Gender Survey) we investigate satisfaction with the respondent's relationship to their partner. Secondly we compare expectations with reality: in Wave 1 there was a question on the expected impact a child would have on relationship to partner; we then look at level of satisfaction with partner in Wave 2 compared to that in Wave 1 for respondents who had a child between the two waves. Thirdly we look at the expectation of the how having a child would affect their financial situation, and then compare their perceived 'ability to make ends meet' in Wave 2 with that in Wave 1 for those who had had a child in the intervening period.

We present the results here for Austria, Germany and Bulgaria. The first wave of the GGS was carried out in 2004 (Bulgaria), 2005 (Germany) and 2008-9 (Austria). The second wave was three to four years later, i.e. 2007 (Bulgaria), 2008-9 (Germany) and 2012-13 (Austria). Considering only those respondents who had a child between waves 1 and 2, the sample sizes were 180 (Germany), 650 (Austria) and 440 (Bulgaria). As the Austrian Wave 1 was limited to individuals aged ≤ 45 , we used this limit throughout.

Our first analysis (Figures 1a-1c) is semi-longitudinal. Because we only have two survey waves we cannot follow the individuals through each year of before and after becoming parents as Myrskylä and Margolis did. The category "Before birth" included all individuals who went on to pregnancy or childbearing before wave 2. The value for partner satisfaction during pregnancy includes only those who were pregnant (or their partner was pregnant) at Wave 2. The value for partner satisfaction in year of birth includes only those whose youngest child was less than one year old at Wave 2. Similarly the group of '1 year after' includes only those whose youngest child was over 1 but less than 2. And the '2 years after' group includes only those with their youngest child aged 2-3 at Wave 2.

As satisfaction is measured on a scale of 0-10, we see that the level of contentment within couples is high during this period of life. There is an uptick during the pregnancy, followed by a small trough in the year of the birth. Adjusting to living with a new baby is not always easy and this can take its toll on the couple relationship. There is then a modest rebound, though on average to a slightly lower level than before the pregnancy.

Couples in Austria seem especially happy (Figure 1a). Men seem to be somewhat happier as fathers in the couple relationship than women at being mothers (Figure 1b). The first child seems to have a bigger impact than the second and a couple's happiness is especially high during their initial transition into parenthood (Figure 1c).

Figure 1a: Satisfaction with relationship to partner: all birth orders, men & women

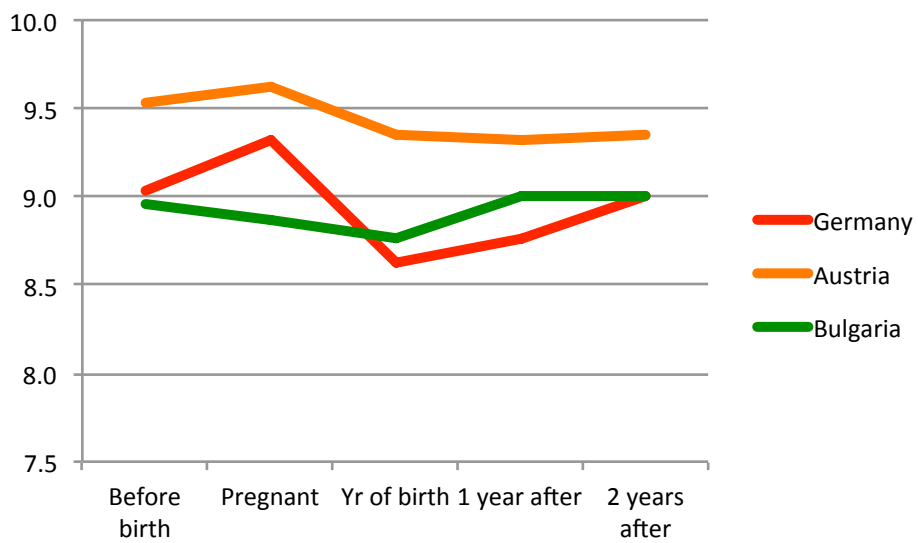


Figure 1b: Satisfaction with relationship to partner: all countries and birth orders

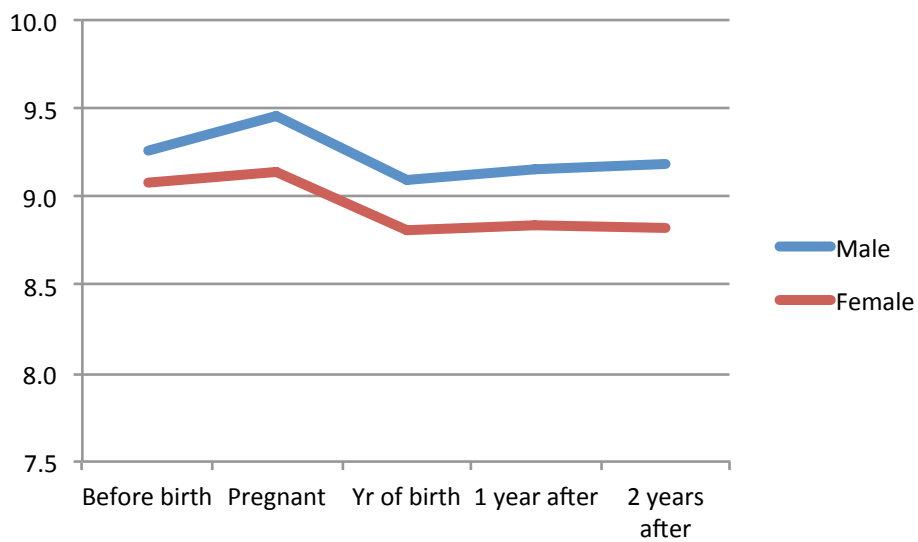
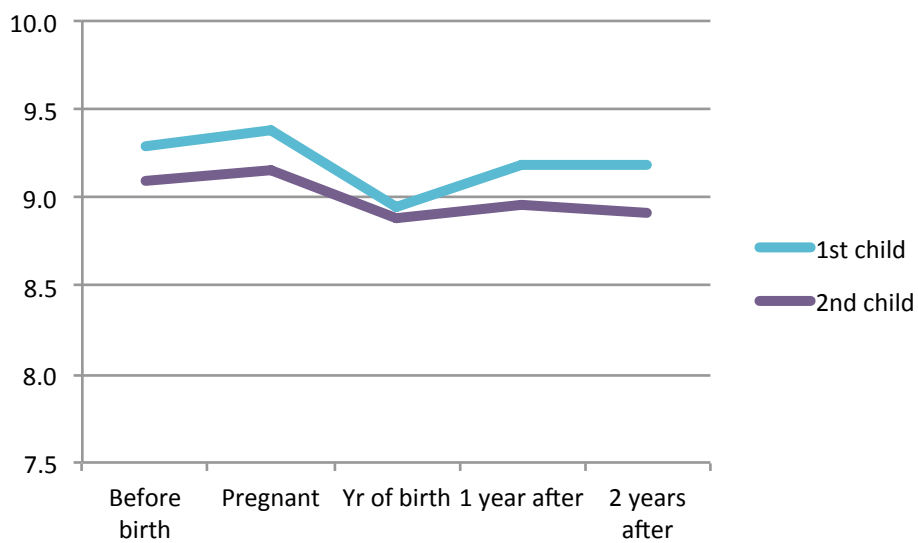


Figure 1c: Satisfaction with relationship to partner: all countries, men & women



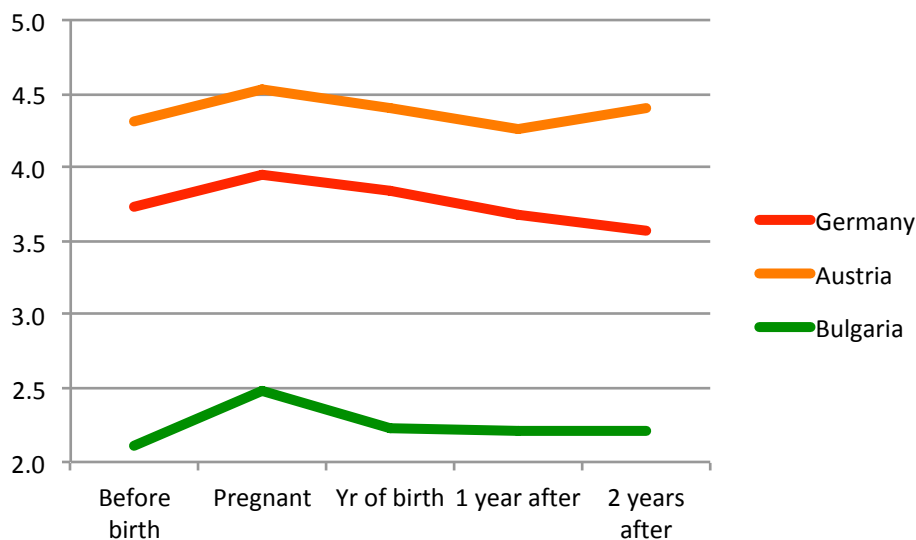
We next look at how reality met expectations on the impact of having a child. In the first wave of the GGS there was a set of questions beginning: “Imagine you have a(nother) child in the next 3 years (even if you can’t have or don’t want one). What effect would it have on different aspects of your life?...”. When asked in Wave 1 of the GGS, most respondents said they expected that having a child would improve closeness with their partner (even though most had a very happy couple relationship). The choice of levels of expectation were Much better, Better, Neither better or worse, Worse and Much Worse. Using the responses on couple satisfaction from the two waves we can see if this actually happens for those who had had a child in the two years prior to wave 2 (Table 1). Sadly, we see that the commonly held high expectations are not met: the most likely outcome is that the couple relationship becomes somewhat more stressed through having a child. Recall the trough during first year of parenthood seen in Figure 1. Of course, when many individuals start at the highest level of satisfaction with their partner, then the only options are to stay just as high or to slip down slightly.

Table 1: Expectation and outcome of impact on couple relationship of having a child

	Germany	Austria	Bulgaria
Expected & actually worse	3%	1%	5%
Expected & actually same	24%	37%	14%
Expected & actually better	7%	7%	19%
Better than expected	20%	8%	11%
Worse than expected	46%	47%	51%

We now look at the trajectories of how easy or hard people are finding it to make ends meet through the childbearing transition (Figure 2).

Figure 2: How easy to ‘make ends meet’: 2= with difficulty, 5=easily



Couples in Austria find life easier financially than in Germany; in Bulgaria young couples are generally struggling to make ends meet. Although we see an uptick financially during pregnancy and a slight drop after the birth, the changes are small.

Finally, in stark contrast to couple happiness, where the outcome tended to be more negative than expected, the impact of having a child on the household's finances was, on average, better than expected across all three countries (Table 2). Young couples are fearful of the severe negative impact that having a child will have on their financial situation: perhaps surprisingly, reality does not, on the whole, bear this out.

Table 2: Expectation and outcome of the financial impact of having a child

	Germany	Austria	Bulgaria
Expected & was harder	24%	20%	15%
Expected & was same	12%	16%	13%
Expected & was better	3%	1%	1%
Better than expected	46%	49%	61%
Worse than expected	14%	13%	10%

The study so far has covered three countries with data from two waves of the GGS. Seven more countries (France, Netherlands, Georgia, Russia, Czech Rep, Lithuania and Poland) have comparable data available and these will be analysed in the coming months.

Reference

Myrskylä, M. and Margolis, R., 2014. Happiness: Before and after the kids. *Demography*, 51(5), pp.1843-1866.