Intended and Actual Transition to a First Child in France:

The Role of Marital and Professional Status

Maria Rita Testa[*] and Laurent Toulemon[**]

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1. Introduction

In France, as in all European countries, the birth of the first child, last transition to adulthood, is delayed. In almost all European countries, fertility is declining at young ages - while rates are increasing at higher ages, when couples are already stable and other events of the transition to adulthood, such as leaving parental home and entering a first union, have already been experienced.

An explicit intention to remain childless is almost not present as an answer to the questionnaire item on ideal number of children, or in number of intended children, among respondents, which indicates that childlessness is mainly involuntary. For childless people the main question is focused on entering a union, if they are not living in a union, and on the timing of having the first child if they are already living as a couple.

The aim of our paper is to study the transition to parenthood by looking at the childbearing outcomes depending on the stated fertility intentions and on several external constraints.

2. Data

A survey on fertility intentions was carried out by Insee (*Institut national de la statistique et des etudes économiques*) and Ined on 2,600 respondents aged 20-45 in 1998 (Toulemon, Leridon 1999). Fertility intentions were collected in a very detailed manner, including total number of expected children, specific reasons for delaying birth (people waiting to finish their studies, making sure that the couple is stable, wishing stable work, having to feel ready…) and expected timing of the next child. Several questions deal with firmness of intention: likelihood to change intentions, discussion with the partner and perceived agreement on fertility intentions. Questions were also asked about the perceived likelihood to have a child in the next two and five years.

[*] Vienna Institute of Demography, Austrian Academy of Sciences.
  Prinz Eugen-Strasse 8, 2nd floor. 1040 Vienna – Austria. maria.rita.testa@oeaw.ac.at

[**] Institut national d'études démographiques.
  133, Bd Davout, 75 980 PARIS Cedex 20 France. toulemon@ined.fr

Respondents who were not infertile and accepted to participate in a follow-up study were re-interviewed in 2001 and 2003, allowing us to study actual fertility against intentions and constraints expressed in 1998. During the follow-up, questions were asked about actual fertility, changes in conjugal and professional situations, fertility impairments, and whether respondents were feeling to now have more or less children than they had intended in 1998.

Only 783 persons could be followed up during the five years, and we are now checking whether the remaining sample is representative of the original one.

3. Methods

The aim of the paper is to disentangle reasons and constraints for wanting and/or having a first child.

The intentions to have a child are considered to be 'strong' if persons intend to have a child within the next five years and 'weak' if persons are not sure whether they want a child and/or if they want their next child after a delay of five years or more.

We carry out two statistical analyses separately.

First, we implement logistic regression models with a dependent variable equal to 1 if people say in 1998 that they intend to have a child in the next 5 years and 0 otherwise.

Second, we perform logistic regression models with a dependent variable equal to 1 if people have actually had a child in the next 5-year period (1998-2003) and 0 otherwise.

In the first model we include various backgrounds and constraints as explanatory variables: sex, age, conjugal situation, duration of union formation, employment status (for both the respondent and her/his partner), educational level, religion, household income level, and fecundity impairments previously experienced.

In the second model we add to the backgrounds and constraints mentioned above, two additional sets of covariates: a) fertility intentions and the exact timing of the desired childbearing; b) some aspects of fertility intentions, such as the firmness of intentions, the perceived likelihood to have a child and to change one's mind, as well as the perceived partner's agreement in having or not having a child and the perceived consequences on the personal and partner's work activity of having a child.

All the characteristics of the respondents included as explanatory variables are taken from the wave 1998 of the survey.

4. Preliminary results

A crude comparison with actual behaviour shows that the expectations highly overestimate actual outcomes (Toulemon 2003). Several factors may have an impact on fertility intentions and, after controlling for intentions, on actual behaviours.

Our preliminary statistical analysis (see tables 1 and 2) shows that cohabiting people are more likely than married couples to say that they intend to have a child, but there are no differences on the likelihood to have a first child between persons in the two types of union, once we control for fertility intentions and other backgrounds and constraints.

Single persons are as likely as others to want a child, but they experience more difficulties in their transition to parenthood.

For people living in couple is the number of years they have been living together that matters: the chance to have a child decreases with the increase of the union duration.

Unemployed people are as likely as others to express childbearing intentions, but they nevertheless have a lower actual fertility, all other things being equal.

The desire to become parent within the next 5 years does not influence the probability to have a child in the stated period (as compared to the answer "don't know" or "in more than five years", as almost no childless respondent intends to remain childless), other thing being equal. On the contrary, the firmness of the intention, as defined by the will not to change their own mind, increases the chance to have a child, when controlled for other variables. Moreover, the perceived likelihood to have a baby in the next 5 years is predicting quite well the childbearing outcome in that period.

5. Some concluding remarks

Due to an easy access to contraception and abortion, unwanted births are now rare in France. The "neutral" situation, which is also the most widespread, is to want a child, but not in the immediate future, thus leaving the future "open".

The decision to become parents is the consequence of a couple's life process ending up in an interruption of contraception in order to have a baby without any further delay.

As evidenced in our study, the transition to a first child is influenced by external constraints, such as unemployment and marital status, as well as by the strength of the child desire, as it is expressed by the firmness of fertility intentions and by the subjective likelihood attributed to the possible future childbearing.

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TABLES:

Table 1

LOGISTIC MODEL FOR WANTING A CHILD WITHIN THE NEXT 5 YEARS (1998-2003).			
Model selected by the stepwise regression			
	Beta	SE	P>z
(Age-30)	0.10	0.48	0.84
(Age-30)^2	-0.55	0.28	0.05
(Age-30)^3	0.47	0.34	0.16
Income	-0.70	0.24	0.00
Income^2	0.04	0.27	0.89
Cohabiting	1.04	0.33	0.00
Fecundity impairments	-0.89	0.45	0.05
_cons	-0.61	0.29	0.04
N	363		
Pseudo Log-likelihood	-163.51		

Table 2

LOGISTIC MODEL FOR HAVING A CHILD WITHIN THE 5-YEAR PERIOD : 1998-2003.			
Model selected by the stepwise regression			
	Beta	SE	P>z
Male	-0.73	0.34	0.03
(Age-30)	-0.91	0.55	0.10
(Age-30)^2	-1.19	0.35	0.00
(Age-30)^3	0.78	0.38	0.04
Single	-2.22	0.38	0.00
Duration of union	-0.13	0.07	0.07
Unemployed	-2.24	0.78	0.00
Religious	0.89	0.40	0.02
Firmness of intention	1.25	0.35	0.00
'Having a baby within 5 years' perceived as not likely	-1.05	0.51	0.04
Cons	0.57	0.43	0.19
N	363		
Pseudo			
Log-likelihood	-124.90		