

Parenting Ideals and Transition to Parenthood

Research question

It is often claimed that high demands on parents can delay the realization of fertility transitions, lead to a limitation of family size (Hilevych und Rusterholz 2018) or even prevent them (Hardyment 2007; Nave-Herz 2012; Beck und Beck-Gernsheim 1990). Until now there has been little research on this topic, with Gauthier et al. (2021) being a recent exception. We discuss this topic using Germany as a case study as it is a good example of high expectations on parents. Parents there seem to be especially stressed, they are afraid to fail in living up to perceived standards of parenting (Quaiser-Pohl 2001; Schneider 2011) and therefore, a strong feeling of uncertainty exists which makes family formation particularly crisis-prone (Quaiser-Pohl 2001). Using a representative panel for the population aged 20 to 39 years, we will investigate whether too high expectations of the tasks of parenthood prevent individuals of having a first or further child.

Sample

The analysis is based on data from the 'Family Leitbild' survey (FLB), a panel study conducted in Germany in 2012 and 2016. In 2012 a random sample of n=5,000 participants aged 20 to 39, representative of the German resident population, was interviewed on the phone. In 2016 the survey was repeated with n=1,858 remaining participants. Analyses were carried out with both, the full sample of 2012 to check the distribution of family role models among young Germans and with the panel to check the impact of these models on a first birth. For the second step the focus of the analysis was on respondents who were childless in 2012 hence 911 persons were left in the sample.

Measurement and analytical strategy

For the analysis, we want to cover as many different aspects of parenting as possible with our variable selection. Preconditions for parenthood include three items: *A couple has to be married*, as an indicator for partnership stability, *The couple needs to have enough money* and *The wife needs to have established herself in her career, regardless whether her partner works*

both for the aspect of financial security. Additional items on parent-child relationship were selected: *Parents should set aside their own needs completely for the sake of the children*, *Parents can do a lot wrong in raising children, so they should become well informed*, and *Children will grow up no matter what, so it's not necessary to put a lot of thought into it*, both as indicators for the acceptance of professionalization of parenthood and active engagement of parents.

Our dependent variable is whether a first birth occurred between wave 1 (2012) and wave 2 (2016). Out of the 911 childless respondents 117 (13%) experienced a birth between the two waves of the panel. For the analyses binary logistic regression models were calculated.

Results

We found the need to become well informed as a parent and the idea that the growing up of children should be accompanied actively by parents to be the most important aspects of parenting ideals in Germany with high overall approval. Nearly as important is the financial aspect, that family formation requires a solid financial base. The agreement that women should have an independent professional career of their own on the one hand confirms the importance of financial prerequisites but on the other hand indicates that family formation should not compromise their economic independence. Other aspects of parenting ideals that can be found in the literature concerning maturity and stability of partnership are not at the center of the German parenting ideals. Marriage is far from being accepted as an important prerequisite of parenthood. Equally, parents are not expected to totally give up their own interests and needs in life for the sake of their children. A comparison between childless people and parents confirms that the core items of the parenting ideals are also the ones which distinguish best between the two groups, i.e. finances and the need to become engaged and informed as a parent. Childless individuals consider these requirements much more important than parents. However, these requirements do not prevent transition to a first birth. It is possible that parenting ideals promote preparation and have more impact on the experience of stress during parenthood itself.

References

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