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**Where qualitative research  
meets demography:  
Interdisciplinary explorations of  
conceptions on fatherhood  
in an extremely low fertility context**

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Where qualitative research meets demography:  
Interdisciplinary explorations of conceptions on fatherhood  
in an extremely low fertility context

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# Abstract

Recent demands to include psychological theories of decision-making and intention-formation in research on family formation coincide with calls for improving research on male fertility and fatherhood. In this paper, we address these notions and present findings from in-depth interviews with 30-year-old childless men from Eastern Germany on their desire for children. Our research is embedded in the societal situation of contemporary Eastern Germany, where birth rates have faced a historical low – the lowest in more than 10 years.

We analyze fourteen interviews, using an analytical paradigm, which we derive from the contemporary social cognitive theory of intention-formation. The focus lies on the examination of male attitudes, values, motives, interests, goals, action beliefs, and self-concepts, and their connection to men's intentions for parenthood.

In conclusion, we compare our results with explanations that the *Theory of Symbolic Self-Completion* and the *Theory of Reasoned Action* give. We argue for the need to bring together psychological and sociological theorizing in this field. (158 words)

## Keywords

Demography, qualitative psychology, Eastern Germany, birth rate, fertility, men, fatherhood, desire for children, intention-formation, problem-centered interview

## Introduction

Our paper reports on characteristics and determinants of men's intentions for parenthood in Eastern Germany. It hereby follows two current lines of scientific interest, which cross the disciplinary boundaries of sociology, demography, and psychology. In 1998, several contributors to the volume "Nurturing Fatherhood" (Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, 1998), criticized the theoretical and empirical disregard of men in current research on *family formation* and *fertility* (see for example Emig & Greene, 1998, Lindberg et al., 1998, Tanfer & Mott, 1998, Sonenstein et al., 1998). In a recent influential paper, Greene & Biddlecom (2000: 105) conclude that more effort needs to be made to integrate knowledge on (i) the meaning of parenthood to men and (ii) the cultural construction of fatherhood into demography's traditional approach to fertility-related behavior. More research into male reproductive behavior – they say – should lead to an increase of our understanding of couples' fertility decision-making and choice process as well as an improvement of the explanatory power of contemporary scientific models.

Similarly, authors of various disciplines, including demography and sociology, have called for applying more sophisticated psychological theory to overcome the shortcomings of traditionally economic and sociological reasoning on fertility decision-making in modern societies (Burch, 1980, de Bruijn, 1999, Hobcraft, 2000). Many sociological and economic explanations of the "traditional" demographic type have been accused precisely at their weak points of argumentation for applying a "much too simple, homemade psychology" (Burkart, 1994: 63f.).

Our paper takes up both threads: It thereby follows the recommendation by Marsiglio et al. (2001: 143) to conduct *social psychological research on male motives*,

*perceptions, and decision-making with regard to fatherhood.* We try to pave the way for a deeper understanding and better explanation of men's "life choices" as "dilemmas and decisions" (Sloan, 1996). Although we consider selected quantitative information on our study subjects, our study holds a *qualitative caliber*, as defined by Denzin & Lincoln (2000: 8).

We address the following questions:

- What are the intentions of men within the process before a transition to parenthood? What are their motives for aspiring to, postponing, or ruling out fatherhood in their life-course? What do they perceive as the rewards or deterrents of entering fatherhood?
- Which factors can explain men's intention-formation? Which psychological theory can help us in understanding the empirical patterns of men's desire for children, their intentions, their behavior, and their subjective evaluations?
- How can answers to these questions help shed light on specific demographic events, like the unparalleled decline of fertility in Eastern Germany after reunification?

First, we will explain the different traditions in which we see rooted our own approach and research questions. We will then briefly report on the exceptional demographic and social context of Eastern Germany, in which our interview study had been conducted in 2001. Following that, we introduce our sample, the applied method, and the analytical procedure, before we present the single results of our analysis in a step by step fashion. The concluding sections then summarize our findings and resume the initial question of modes of psychological interpretation in an multidisciplinary context.<sup>1)</sup>

# Theoretical and empirical rationale

## Men and their intentions of family-formation

Our knowledge on motives, intentions, and desires of men regarding fatherhood is relatively scarce. When it comes to the role that men play in the process of family formation, the applicable metaphors that authors use to depict this situation sometimes read like the description of a ghost train. One finds characterizations of men as being "shadows" (Bledsoe, 2000), "invisible" (Coley, 2001), "timid beings" (Roeder, 1994), and "acute-decliners" (Goldsheider & Kaufman, 1996). Sometimes men appear only in a "back-lighting" (Ventimiglia, 1997). In contrast, literature on women in this field even goes as far as providing us with an "intimate geography" (Angier, 1999).

Consequently, one does not learn much about the specific *desires* of men, nor of their specific *contributions* to the transition process from the available recent literature on "men and fatherhood". In a German literature review of the late 1980s, Kuehler points out that a substantive study on this issue is heavily lacking (Kuehler, 1989), and that, in fact, some scholars even tend to negate the existence of a genuine desire for men to have children (cf. Fichtner, 1999: 128). However, there is considerable research in related fields of study, such as the *consequences* of fatherhood and the specific problems of men who experience *involuntary childlessness*. Furthermore, there is an unsystematic and rather eclectic collection of sociological, psychological, and demographic studies which provide us with additional literature on which we drew for the design of our own research. We will report on some of the most important findings in the following sections.

### *Consequences of fatherhood*

Today, we find a strong scholarly interest in the consequences of a transition to parenthood. In studies on this subject, fathers are also considered as central actors. Various publications try to point out which factors determine partnership performance and *postpartum* satisfaction (Newman & Newman, 1988, Palkovitz & Copes, 1988, Berman & Pedersen, 1987, Watson et al., 1995, Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001, Werneck, 1997), changes in gender role identity (Feldman & Aschenbrenner, 1983, Krampe & Fairweather, 1993), or the involvement of fathers in parental tasks, respectively (Rettig et al., 1999, Fox & Bruce, 2001, Geerster & Gallagher, 2001). In the latter field, the current discourse on so-called “New Fathers” plays a significant role (Bronstein & Cowan, 1988, Lempp, 1989, Hall, 1993, Burgess, 1997, LaRossa, 1997, Griswold, 1999, McQuillan & Belle, 2001, Werneck, 1998).

In total, this literature leaves no doubt that it is worthwhile to include men into research on family-formation and parenthood. However, providing the aforementioned knowledge and concepts on men as fathers, these studies led us to explicitly design an approach that asks for the *consequences* of fatherhood, which men *anticipate* before the transition. Our underlying assumption is that anticipation or "free fantasies" of future scenarios can serve as important regulators of individual development (Oettingen, 1999, Oettingen et al., 2001). The demand for such kind of research is also confirmed by the results of a theoretical examination on this topic by Tanfer & Mott (1998).

### *Psychoanalytical and counseling literature*

Secondly, there is considerable literature that examines men and their desire for children from a psychoanalytical standpoint (Anthony & Benedek, 1970, Frick-Bruder

& Schuett, 1992, Schlottner, 1998). The literature also examines men from therapeutic or counseling experiences, with the childbearing motivation of men who face involuntary childlessness (Roeder, 1994, Kuechenhoff & Koennecke, 1999, Ermel et al., 1999, Koennecke et al., 2001). In this field, in particular, the thorough documentation given on applied *interview guidelines* and on *practical experiences* teaches us to take into account various particularities of interviews with men on this subject. We learn that men tend to give rather stereotypical or elusive answers when asked about their desire for children and for an own family. This is obviously a somewhat delicate and unfamiliar topic for many of them. Thus, we chose an interview technique that is particularly targeted at avoiding the "invalidity and superficiality trap".

#### *Other studies of sociological and demographic provenance*

A third, loosely interrelated group of investigations, on which we drew in our own study, comprises mainly sociological and demographic integrative studies on fertility-related *behavior* of men. As already indicated, there is no systematic research program on men as "procreative beings" (Marsiglio). Thus, we had to make use of quite eclectic findings in an also eclectic way.

In a recent review, as if he intends to prove our assumptions, Coleman (2000) summarizes our knowledge concerning male fertility to the extent by which demographers and biologists have investigated it. He concludes that, ultimately, his overview can do little more than confirm the long-heard complaints of demographers, that male fertility and reproduction are unjustly ignored (Coleman, *ibid.*: 55).

For Germany, the literature provides us at least with the most basic descriptive data on men's reproductive behavior. These come from research in the context of the



Family and Fertility Survey (Pohl, 1995). Results show that the average age of first fatherhood lies around 30 in West Germany, and 25 in East Germany. Two-thirds of West as well as East German men, from the below-25 age group, say that either they or their partner use contraceptives, though they mostly seem to rely on their female partner's contraceptive practice. The study also finds a slight inner-country difference in the ideal family size reported by men: West Germans tend toward a 2-3-children family size, whereas East Germans prefer the 1-2-children family size. The total expected number of children per family, however, is 1.8 in both parts of Germany (Pohl, 2000: 265ff.).

Furthermore, Pohl (ibid.) highlights another finding which is particularly interesting for our study; namely the high percentage of uncertainty about one's future intended fertility. About 30% of men between ages 20 and 40 replied to the question "how many children do you ultimately want" by marking the "don't know" option. The reasons for this result, which differs only slightly among East and West German men, remain still unclear.

From an individual life-course perspective, Dutch demographer Jacobs (1995) presents more psychologically-oriented reflections on the term "male desire for children". He suggests a model that bears the distinctions between different components of desire (*change* and *timing*) and between a *manifest* and a *latent* style of desire, which is implied by different factors within the life-course. As one of his crucial conclusions, which we adopted, he points out the necessity of a diachronic (i.e. life-course) investigation into the development of men's desire for children.

Along similar lines, Strauss & Goldberg (1999) formulate an important theoretical insight. By an empirical study, they are able to prove the large extent to

which men's views of themselves *before* the birth of their first child impacts different aspects of fatherhood (for instance, motivation for role change, psychological well-being, and involvement with their infant). This leads us to the hypothesis that the *motivation* for a child itself might also be influenced by such self-views. To include questions on people's self-concept was an obvious conclusion we drew from this finding.

In recent years, William Marsiglio has contributed extensively to adding knowledge on men and their intentions for, and conceptions of fatherhood (Marsiglio 1995, 1998). In a recent study, he and colleagues (Marsiglio et al., 2001) examine men's procreative intentions and conceptions on contraception and impregnation. They base their methods on concepts derived from Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory, and they thereby convincingly show a viable path into a deeper understanding of men's inner worlds. However, their work assumes a sociological rather than a psychological approach. From our perspective, it misses an adequate reflection of contemporary social psychological theories of action.

As this brief review on available literature suggests, the *state of the art* of research on male intentions to parenthood is far from satisfactory. Thus, our study adopts a qualitative psychological approach to contribute to our understanding of the mechanisms of male parenthood intention-formation.

### **The East German "fertility crisis"**

In this section, we briefly outline the exceptional demographic situation in which our own investigation is situated. As is well known, Eastern German fertility underwent a dramatic decline, which started in September 1990, and reached its lowest

level at a Total Fertility Rate (TFR) of 0.8 in the years 1992 to 1995. A variety of interpretations and explanations of these effects have been proposed, ranging between a mere "adaptation" to a profound "fertility crisis" view (Dorbritz, 1997, Sackmann, 1999). However, no generally accepted explanation has been formulated so far. Current explanations mostly point to causal factors (yet differently weighted): the cutback of financial incentives, the great uncertainties in times of societal transformation, or changes in the timing of childbearing (cf. Kreyenfeld, 2001). Figure 1 illustrates the exceptional abruptness of the fertility decline.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

For our study, we considered it particularly interesting to interview men whose demographic behavior we could expect, in particular their desire for children, their notions of fatherhood, and their intentions to family formation, to be affected by this societal upheaval. We identified the cohorts of the early 1970's as a particularly well-suited sample. Whilst they had undergone their education in the period of state socialism, they had to start to deal with questions of union formation and family formation ("yes, no—or later?") immediately after unification. With regard to childbearing, we can classify this cohort as a "post-unification cohort", that is, hardly any of its members would have set up a family before unification (Kreyenfeld, *ibid.*: 104)

From these considerations, we prepared ourselves for the possibility that members of this cohort might feel (or have felt) especially at odds with, on the one hand, arguably shared *pre-unification* conceptions of (family) lives and, on the other hand, the perception of rapid social and cultural changes. Hence, we did not expect our subjects to be in "simple situations" in terms of linear and straightforward life-stories.

Also, this social context feature supported our choice of a qualitative approach, in order to be able to picture "a personal jumble" of life orientations as well.

## Sample and method

### The sample

The sample for the empirical investigation stems from the Rostock Longitudinal Study which is an extensive psychological longitudinal survey run by the Institute for Medical Psychology of the University of Rostock (see Meyer-Probst & Teichmann, 1984; Reis, 1997). This study began as early as 1970, in order to determine the biological, social, and psychological risk factors for the lifelong development of children. Its initial sample consisted of 1,000 newborn children and their parents. Follow-up studies took place with a representative sample of 300 families when the children were two, six, ten, fourteen, twenty, and twenty-five years old, respectively.

Twenty male participants of this study make up the sample of our qualitative in-depth study. We selected people who agreed on a voluntary basis to additional interviews outside the normal schedule of the panel. A post-stratification of this haphazard-sample revealed that our sample does not differ significantly from the rest of the panel with respect to various features (for instance, education, parental background, social competence, intelligence, personality). That is, we do not have to assume any major tendencies of our results that are due to sample selectivity.

Following from what has been mentioned above, our male subjects stem from the cohort of 1970/1971 and were 31 years old when we interviewed them. Fourteen of these men were childless, and they formed the actual *target group* of our investigation because we followed the aforementioned recommendations, namely to probe men on

their conceptions of fatherhood and intentions *before* they experienced their (first) transition. For a brief description of the target sample, please refer to Table 1.<sup>2)</sup>

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

### **The interviews**

As mentioned above, we decided to choose a method that is both psychologically sound and well-suited to the difficulties of the topic that we sketched in the theoretical section. Thus, we selected the Problem-Centered Interview (PCI) which was developed by the German psychologist Witzel (Witzel, 1985, 2000). This approach is particularly designed for the purpose of in-depth research on "socially relevant problems" within modern societies. Witzel writes:

Empirical studies from the actor's perspective ... have been given new importance ... by individualization theory... According to this theory ... the plausibility of inferring human actions from a societal framework, societal mechanisms of selection, or the socially unequal distribution of resources is diminishing. ... Newer concepts of socialization research ... point to individual accomplishment instead of the use of social normative thinking in dealing with living conditions and societal experiences. (Witzel, 2000: paragraph 2)

The PCI-method, which is a close derivative of Glaser's and Strauss' Grounded Theory, exceeds its fathers by a detailed and psychologically refined apparatus of question-styles and communicative strategies. In general, a PCI resembles the style of client-centered therapy (cf. Rogers, 1944). It uses a well-defined set of communicative techniques like *mirroring*, *summaries*, and *confrontations* in order to ensure an appropriate understanding of the individual's *inner frame of symbolization*. More technically speaking, Witzel provides a differentiation of *general* from *specific explorations*, and of *communication strategies*, which *generate storytelling* from those which *generate understanding*. These concepts allow us to apply an optimum

proportion of structure and openness within the course of our interviews (Witzel, *ibid.*: paragraph 11ff.; cf. Mey, 1999: 143).

Furthermore, we handed out a brief questionnaire for the basic socio-demographic data immediately after the interview. The core instrument, however, was an extensive interview guideline, which encompassed all the topics, questions, and working hypotheses that we brought as "inevitable previous knowledge" (Witzel) with us into the interview. We did not use, however, this guideline in order to streamline the interviews in a "bureaucratic way" but rather "as a sort of transparency of the background", also to "provide orientation and ensure comparability of the interviews" (Witzel, *ibid.*: paragraph 8). All these considerations, methods, and techniques were targeted at facilitating maximum validity and authenticity within the interviews.

In sum, we questioned our interviewees on three main groups of topics:

- (a) *Becoming a father*. Questions addressed issues such as thinking the first time about forming an own family; the personal history of desiring children; characteristics and the time-range of family formation considerations; reasons and counter-reasons; the quality of today's desire to become a father; personal pre-conditions for a "yes" to parenthood; the decision-making process; the role of the partner; anticipation of future talks about parenthood .
- (b) *Being a father*. Here, questions addressed issues such as the personal meaning of fatherhood; anticipated life changes by becoming a father; the quality of probable changes in different domains (thoughts, feelings, actions, partnership, personal relations to parents, friends or relatives, finances, job, career, dwelling, or daily-life situation); the advantages and disadvantages of fatherhood at different stages in life;

the personal ideal of fathering; the number of desired children; expected changes of "more than one".

(c) *Interaction with a partner or other people.* Here, questions addressed issues such as the quality and characteristics of talks with the partner about kids; the distribution of interests; the reasons and quality of agreement/disagreement; descriptions of "kids talks"; the perception of the partner's wishes and desires; agreements, differences, and quarrels; arguments exchanged in pros/cons of children; interaction with friends or relatives about this topic; the influence of other people on one's own decision-making; the role that parents, friends, and relatives (might) play.

Additionally, a separate section of the interviews was dedicated to the subjects' experiences with the ongoing societal transformation and to the question of how far they perceive that these changes had altered their attitude towards an own family.<sup>3)</sup> Each of these topics was probed in detail by means of the PCI interview techniques, so the interviews lasted between one and two hours each. For the analysis, transcripts of the taped interviews formed our starting point.

### **Interview analysis**

The crucial element for the analysis of qualitative interviews is the *analytical paradigm* (also: *coding paradigm*). An analytical paradigm can be described as a theoretically-derived tool-kit of questions and categories by which the researcher addresses the text, i.e. codes it. For our coding procedure, we began with the Grounded Theory in its recent phraseology by Strauss & Corbin (1990). This method suggests that the analyst should refine the initial ("open") coding of the text by then inquiring on *conditions, context, strategies, and consequences* of a given question. This quartette of

concepts is the coding paradigm of the so-called *axial coding strategy*, according to Strauss & Corbin (ibid.: 99).

This specific coding paradigm might be a rewarding approach to many research questions. However, our study aims at a stronger psychological focus than the broad methodology of Strauss and Corbin would allow for. Thus, we decided to refer to psychological concepts of personality in the axial coding procedure. Here, the focus lies on a social cognitive model of intention-formation, which allows us to draw on psychological theories on *dispositions of evaluation*, *dispositions of action*, and *dispositions of the self*, and their impact on intention-formation (see Asendorpf, 1999, Bilsky & Schwartz, 1994). This theoretical paradigm is depicted in Figure 2.

[FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Following this model, we laid out the following theoretical categories for the axial coding steps:

- (a) *Attitudes*. Attitudes are defined as dispositional evaluations of objects, either real or fictitious ones. For instance, people have attitudes toward political parties, but also toward children or "being a parent".
- (b) *Values*. Values are defined as dispositional evaluations of broad classes of concepts. Some instances of values are "equality", "honesty", or "charity".
- (c) *Motives*. Motives are defined as dispositional evaluations of consequences of actions. Some instances of motives are "intimacy" or "power".
- (d) *Interests*. Interests are defined as dispositional evaluations of actions. Whether you enjoy playing chess rather than football, playing with toddlers rather than helping your son or daughter in math, are all examples of interests.



- (e) *Goals*. Goals emerge at the intersection of motives, interests and abilities. They are specific "personalized" motives, in which personal skills play a crucial role.
- (f) *Action beliefs*. Action beliefs can be regarded as dispositional expectancy-styles (e.g., optimistic vs. pessimistic styles), action orientations (e.g., state vs. action orientation), or styles of attribution (e.g., internal vs. external). In this context, coping-styles can be regarded as dispositions of actions that become effective in the face of danger, stress, or demand.
- (g) *Self-concept, self-esteem*. The self-concept is defined as the range of beliefs, descriptions, and attributes that people have about themselves. Self-esteem is the dispositional evaluation of one's own self as it is represented by the respective self-concept.

In our coding procedure, we then proceeded as follows:

First, we construed an open selection of all quotations from the interviews that contained evaluations, judgments, self-descriptions, or other evaluative expressions of our subjects. We then assumed that the desire to have a child or the desire to remain childless (for the time being) were both viable options for men today. That is, our guiding question throughout the entire coding process was: How can we understand the emergence of men's potential intentions to have one's own child? And, finally, we asked which factors were systematically linked to an intention to fatherhood. From our theoretical model, it would be conceivable that, values, attitudes, motives, interests, goals, action beliefs, and aspects of the self-concept and esteem all might affect intention-formation. The empirical connections (or linkages) between observed concepts and intentions will be the central results of our analysis.<sup>4)</sup>

# Results

## General observation

As an initial result of our analysis, we have to acknowledge the great diversity of narratives in our sample. Initially, we were skeptical whether we would find a sufficiently ample variation of statements from men of the same age group (and arguably of similar living conditions). We were, however, surprised by the great variety of memories, descriptions, thoughts, wishes, and concerns that men connected to stories about their desires to have children. To give an initial overall view of our respondents, we describe some general similarities and characteristics of the interviews.

First, of all 14 non-parent men, there was *only one* who described himself as strictly anti-parenthood minded. The others, even those men who said that they would definitely not be happy if a child came along within the next few years, expressed general acceptance of a child if a pregnancy would "just happen by chance". No one expressed a pro-abortion or pro-sterilization attitude in order to remain childless.

Secondly, a rather surprising finding to us was the generally strong disapproval of a "too strict" family planning. With only a few exceptions, we found a broad and intense objection toward planning the (potential) transition "too exactly, for instance fixing a year and month for a childbirth". One man even mentioned, with great disapproval, the notion of "assembly line production of kids" in this family planning context. Our respondents shared the idea that "kids just happen when they (i.e. the kids) want". On the other hand, somewhat contradictorily, they willingly agreed with the contraceptive practice of their female partners. This coincided with the finding of Pohl (2000: 265) that men (still) rely heavily on female contraceptive methods and decisions.

Thirdly, our results indicate that it is still reasonable to assume a general social (parental) expectancy toward parenthood in Eastern Germany. Almost all participants spoke of parental (mostly motherly) claims and wishes for their own grandchildren. At the same time, however, our subjects expressed a general disregard of these parental wishes and, instead, insisted that *this* decision is a highly personal one. In other words, our men tended to be amused by these parental "hints" rather than attaching any particular importance to them.

For the display of more detailed results, we will apply a *comparative contrasted case study approach* in order to highlight the factors which determine fatherhood intentions. That is, we compare two broad cases, namely single and non-single men.<sup>5)</sup> We regard the current partnership status as fundamental to a possible transition to fatherhood because, "though nowadays it is possible to father a child without physical contact, the normal way in Germany for a man to *become a father* is still to find a woman willing to bear his child" (Pohl, 2000: 260; italics in original). Within these two basic groups, individual cases are contrasted between men with intentions toward parenthood vs. men without these intentions. Only men who clearly expressed that they want to become a father at some time in their life were assigned to the intention group.

In the following paragraphs, we will proceed along the categories of our analytical paradigm and report separately on each result. We will also present two additional findings, which emerged aside from the applied framework.

### **Attitudes**

On the level of attitudes, as defined above, research on male intention-formation deals with many conflicting views men have on children and their own fatherhood.

Results showed that to expect clear connections expressed in statements such as "Positive evaluations of children and of closeness and commitment to the partner result in a clear intention to parenthood", is *essentially wrong*. By looking at attitudes alone, the intention-formation process for men does not seem to run in a straight line. On the contrary, it rather allows for many different and conflicting attitudes. Both for single men and for men in steady relationships, we found the following links:

- (a) The quality of the attitude toward children in general, and toward the expected consequences of having a child, did not turn up as a qualifying factor for either an intention for parenthood or for an intention to avoid parenthood.
- (b) The same holds true for the quality of attitudes toward an upper age limit for becoming a father. To accept and acknowledge the existence of such a limit did not automatically result in the intention to follow it.
- (c) We found another non-trivial connection between the quality of men's relationships to their partners, their commitment to her life plans, and their own intentions. To be with a partner who has a clear intention to parenthood did not mean that our subjects would develop their own intention, too. These factors were independent of each other. But *vice versa*, single men with family intentions reported that they would not engage in a serious relationship with a woman who does not want kids at all.
- (d) We found a real differentiating factor, however, in the reported attitude toward the family formation of peers. Only men with their own intentions to become a parent considered the observed family formation of others as positive. An anti-natal intention was connected to pointing out negative aspects of this peer behavior.
- (e) A characteristic positive evaluation for men with no family intentions was a "young life-style" (i.e., going out often, meeting spontaneously with friends, no long-term

planning), to which a child would mean a large constraint. Only men with clear fertility intentions reported that they had already moved away from this lifestyle—irrespective of whether they were in a relationship or not.

### **Values**

The observed patterns on the level of values differentiated especially well between single and non-single men. In the group of single men, only men with clear family intentions reported values that guide their life and reasoning. General responsibility, maturity, and family as such were *characteristic values* here. We also observed such values in the group of non-single men. In the latter group, however, values, which are attached to a life without kids, showed up in the non-intention group as well. For instance, the notion of general personal self-actualization appeared at central parts of the interviews. From this finding, one could conclude that "grand values" seem to be linked to steady relationships and/or intentions to childbearing, but not to a rather individualistic life-style.

### **Motives**

Looking for motives proved to be a powerful tool in our analysis. The range of evaluated anticipated consequences of parenthood was large in the single and the non-single groups. Here also, single men with an intention for parenthood showed a wide variety of anticipated positive outcomes of family formation: To achieve a life with more meaning, happiness and vitality in life, security, maintenance of family tradition, a contribution to self-actualization, and the avoidance of loneliness, to name only some. No negatively-evaluated consequences were found here at all.

The available information from non-single men was scarcer here, with a larger proportion of anticipated negative outcomes, including for instance, the expected cutback of options that fatherhood would probably mean. This finding could be a hint of a general striving for self-completion that is particularly felt by single men, but less strongly so in steady relationships. Single men seem to strive to achieve something, whereas non-single men seem to avoid unfavorable developments – or do not think much about it at all.

### **Interests**

The observed differences in reported parenthood-related interests were particularly clear-cut, differentiating between *intenders* and *non-intenders*, regardless of their current relationship status. Only men who intended parenthood reported a large variety of activities that they would like to do together with a child. For instance, to play and to fabricate things with a child, to fulfill joyfully "all these parental duties", or to "explain the world to the child" were very much appreciated by men who aspired to parenthood. By contrast, such reports occupied only a marginal place in the reports of non-intending men.

### **Goals**

The analysis of answers to the question of which specific projects, plans, or targets men want to achieve (i.e., which *goals* they have) with respect to family formation, did not add much information to the findings regarding interests and motives. This is exactly as the theoretical plot would predict. The *intenders* basically named, for instance, to "pass on something" to a child, to be a responsible and good

father, to be a "100%-dad", even to acquire one's own grandchildren, as goals. On the other hand, one non-intending man in a steady relationship seemed to justify his way by pointing out that he "does not regard family as a goal as such".

### **Action beliefs**

Action beliefs turned out to be an important part of the story men had to tell. Ultimately, this conclusion is due to the richness of given descriptions, as well as to the centrality of these passages within the whole story. We found narratives of neutrally or negatively experienced dissociation from the "kids topic", of "unimaginability" of children (although not having any objections toward them), of ambivalence, frustration, or depression about not being able to develop or realize any clear-cut attitudes toward their own "fatherhood-question". Moreover, we found passive beliefs of "wait and see", as well as strong beliefs in a continuous step-by-step development and planning toward the fulfillment of their own desire for kids. Particularly the *intenders* in steady relationships seemed to be mentally involved in processes of imagination (i.e., how it would be to be a father) and of anticipation (e.g., how their partner would tell them about a pregnancy, whereas the other groups did not show any clear pattern in their expectancy-styles).

It seems to be true that action beliefs are, in general, a personality trait with a high degree of idiosyncrasy. That is, it is less possible to derive them from other social conceptions or ideas. This standard finding also shows up in the interviews. Action-beliefs are important, almost indispensable, in understanding the individual case, but we only found one clear-cut correlation with intentions. It seemed that the closer and more realistic the individual implementation of intentions was, the more positive and realistic

actions and expectations prevailed. It was not possible, however, to substantiate any further links. Particularly in this area, a future social psychological theory of life-course decision-making, which is still to appear, would have to make stronger points and contributions to our understanding.

### **Self-concept**

For self-related statements, strong defining factors were found. First, it was the negatively coded question of: "Imagine yourself never being a parent", which produced considerable differences in the answers given by *intenders* and *non-intenders*. All men, who report they aspire to parenthood, had particularly negative evaluations of living a life without own kids in the future. In other words, only men who could imagine living a life without kids had (or could afford to have) no intentions toward parenthood.

A large variety of further self-descriptions had been given which we were able to line up quite coherently along one dimension. One pole of the scale was formed by self-concepts such as mature, stable, or reliable for the *intenders* and the second pole by explorative or clownish for the *non-intenders*. However, other potentially discriminating conceptions, for example "traditional vs. non-traditional gender roles" or "good experiences in dealing with children" did not differentiate in a consistent way between having an intention toward parenthood or not.

### **Two additional findings**

We would like to present two additional details which depicted a men-specific perspective on childbearing intentions. Moreover, these findings highlight



characteristics of the social situation that some men consider when they reflect upon their own potential fatherhood transition.

The first finding also turned up in the reports of *intenders* and of *non-intenders*. It refers to the experience of emotional distance to the whole "family business", or even "unimaginability" of having one's own children. For instance, respondent Mr. P. (an intender) said:

Nobody ever has prepared me for this [a potential parenthood; HvdL] (...) It is still like this in our society, the girls have it all taught to them, but not men. A man is not told how he has to lead a family. (...) I don't have any idea beforehand. I have never thought about it, either. I have never played with dolls or such ... I have not been prepared for this task at all. In the end, one is really thrown in at the deep end. (...) A girl is usually much better prepared for all this. (Mr. P., ll.2097ff.; our translation)

Also, in other reports we frequently heard statements such as "I somehow cannot really imagine what it means to have a child" (various references). That is, many of our men found it difficult to develop a detailed idea or an anticipation of fatherhood before the event.

The second finding refers to the perceptions that some men had of women, and of a shift in female life-orientation after German reunification. With one group of men, we found judgments of the following kind: For instance, Mr. B. (an intender) and Mr. H. (a non-intender) said:

Yeah, that's the point. (...) I don't know, I feel that all women have changed in the meantime (...) I know, they don't like to hear stuff like this, but all they ever think about is money, partying, and fashion (...) Somehow it has really changed. My Mom says the same: In former times, it was the men who had only nonsense in their heads, and nowadays it's rather the women. (...) Yeah, for sure, women are much less interested in kids nowadays. (Mr. B., ll.1261ff.; our translation)

But, for instance, these [female] friends of mine. For them not only their career matters, but also kids. This is rather the exceptional nowadays. (Mr. H., ll.404ff.; our translation)

From our perspective, it would be a rewarding step to analyze perceptions of this kind in more detail. But we have to pay heed to the limitations of our paper and restrict our remarks to the hint of the possible relevance of changing gender roles in East Germany after unification, on which we will come back in the concluding chapter.

## Summary of results

It proved to be an important step for our analyses to divide our respondents into a single and a non-single group, as well as into *intenders* and *non-intenders*. Because we were interested in contrasting men with and without intentions toward fatherhood, as well as men inside and outside intimate relationships, this procedure allowed us a true comparison of the link between attitudes, values, motives, interests, goals, action-beliefs, and aspects of the self to the subjects' intentions for parenthood.

On the level of *general family-related attitudes* and attitudes toward the anticipated changes of the self-concept, we initially found a rather mixed and ambiguous linkage between positive and negative attitudes toward children and toward becoming a parent with intentions. However, some indirect attitudes gave a clearer picture. To have a negative attitude toward remaining childless was characteristic only for the *intenders*, whereas positive attitudes toward a "young life-style" or having a youthful self-concept clearly indicated that a respondent was a *non-intender*. *Intenders* tended to report that they had given up this attitude and life-style. Also, the quality of attitudes toward the family formation of peers was linked to their own intentions in a straightforward way. Moreover, we retrieved similar results for the consideration of interests. Only *intenders* demonstrated positive evaluations of child-related activities

(i.e., interests), whereas the *non-intenders* did not, or reported skepticism or a lack of interest.

Which role did the other evaluations, namely dispositions of action and of the self, play? Here, to examine values, motives, and self-views was the crucial factor. Our results led to a number of further insights.

First, on the level of values, the answers of respondents who were single and wanted a child appeared more complex and detailed. Considering this, there was reason for us to recognize this as having taken a *developmental step* from an individualistic and pragmatic philosophy of life toward a more principled and fundamental one that also allows for universally binding judgments. Among those men who were in steady relationships, we observed one additional level of differentiation. We found in the *non-intenders* group, additional to those aforementioned values, some consideration of values that would contradict a family formation. A non-intender said: "Nowadays, people in general take far too little consideration of themselves and of their own needs. I like to be a lazy person from time to time – but probably this will get more difficult once a child is born" (Mr. H.).

Secondly, considering motives, we found similar results, which depicted intention-formation of men in an even more precise way. When men named positively evaluated *consequences* of family formation, this was regularly linked to an intention to do so. We found this link particularly strong in the group of single men. The interpretation might hold that these men strongly hope to get benefits from a family formation, for instance, a life with more meaning and less loneliness. For the group of single men it holds: If there are no pro-natal motives, there is no intention either.

For men in steady relationships, these findings were less strongly accentuated. It seemed that a number of the *intenders* from the non-single group were more involved with technical or practical issues than with an anticipation of consequences. However, the *non-intenders* from this group also discussed negative consequences of parenthood. They substantiate their lack of intention by providing negative consequences. Taken together, these specific results can be depicted in Tables 2. We will discuss the implications of these findings in the separate discussion section.

[TABLES 2 ABOUT HERE]

Furthermore, our analysis came up with two additional specific details. These details show possible *peculiarities* in the male perspective, which have only been occasionally noticed by research. First, we found a (sometimes massive) distance that men experienced toward the family question due to their male-role socialization. And secondly, men realized their inevitable dependence on women when they faced their own unfulfilled fertility desires. Particularly in modern societies, where female life-orientations are decreasingly predictable and calculable, this question might become more virulent for men.

Moreover, these findings, in turn, pointed toward the exceptional social situation that applied to our subjects: They had been socialized in a different state than the one in which they have to face relationship and family choices now. This insight and its possible consequences for an applicable theory will be discussed in the following chapter.

# Discussion: Towards a psychological theory of men's fertility intention-formation

## **Contributions of psychological theories of intention formation**

How can we understand and use these findings for explanatory purposes? And how can psychological theory contribute to advanced theorizing on a micro-level?

One possible way to respond to these questions is to point out that the analytical paradigm of personality psychology already provides us with a good part of the answer. By applying such a paradigm, we were able to explain how intentions result from other relevant parts of personality; namely dispositions of evaluation, of action, and of the self. A sufficient explanation, then, is to point out that these dispositions are acquired by individuals during their life-long socialization in a distributive process, mostly by parental and peer influences. Once such evaluations and beliefs are gained (internalized), they impact in the expounded way.

However, from a psychological perspective, there is more than the question "how does it happen?" A scientifically valid explanation should also give an answer to the question, *why* these observed connections hold (cf. de Bruijn, 1999: 1). For our study, that means to respond to the question: Are the observed relationships between motives and self-concepts, between attitudes and social norms, arguably part of a broader explanatory concept, i.e. a theory? In response to this question, we will show that the differences in the factors, which were involved in the intention-formation of men from our sample, are to some extent compatible with two completely different social psychological theories on motivation of behavior.

The *Theory of Symbolic Self-Completion* (Gollwitzer & Wicklund, 1985, Gollwitzer et al., 1999) describes human motivation by assuming self-defining goals. According to this theory, people strive for certain goals and they define themselves in terms of the achievement of these goals. Therefore, people aim for the acquisition of specific symbols (which can be things, behavior, or actions), that signal one's self-defining achievement. Instances of such symbols would be a diploma or a red sports car for "success", but also a child for "being a real man". It seems that for some men, to have a baby symbolizes, to a great extent, the achievement of such a goal, which covers a great part of their self-definition.

The differences we observed between men with intentions toward parenthood and men without these intentions, regarding their motives and self-conceptions, favor this explanation. Men who attach such high (symbolic) meaning to family formation are surely more prone than others to develop family-forming intentions.

But this seems to hold true only for single men. Men in steady relationships provided us with a smaller range of motives and self-conceptions. Their interests and action-beliefs, in contrast, showed a more pronounced form. Considering the large acceptance of their partner's intentions and family planning, the *Theory of Planned Behavior* might be appropriate to explain the observed stories. In this theory, people's intentions are a combination of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived action control (Ajzen, 1991, 2002). The best instances of this form of intention-formation were our *intenders* in steady relationships. They gave a large number of reports concerning their partner's desire (of which they approved), and issues of "social normality" of becoming a parent, and of external opportunity structure (e.g. to have enough money to raise a child). Without stressing a great personal involvement in the "family-decision business",

they said that they would want to become a parent. That is, they would agree with their partner's family plans.

Finally, these theoretical explorations also explain why, if neither the strive for symbolic self-completion through children nor an acceptance of the partner's intention was given, then no man expressed an intention to form a family. We can also explain why men from the intending single-group were so much more complex and detailed in their values and motives. The reason is that they strive for personal completion. Men in relationships, however, *do* find another accepted source of self-completion: their female partner. Many motives like "not being lonely" or "more happiness and vitality in life" might have already been realized by entering into a partnership.

### **Placing psychological findings in their social context**

But where is the aspired linkage of our results with the societal situation which our research was placed in? Our subjects themselves gave us the relevant hint on the perceived social conditions of their considerations. The instanced statements of Mr. B., Mr. H., and Mr. P. on their perception of male isolation and of a change of female life-orientations (see under "*additional results*" above) pointed out the interdependence between intention-formation, male socialization, and general shifts of life-orientations. Obviously, the upheaval of the Eastern German political system had also been accompanied by the increasing evidence of the disturbed linkage of (gendered) socialization with later family life.

The conclusions that we derive from these findings reveal to us the need for a more extensive analysis of East Germany's turbulent social and cultural history. Perhaps male intention-formation was impeded, or at least affected, by the background of a

rather distant male parenthood socialization *and* by the perceived strong female role shifts after unification. If we want to understand *how* the societal transformation affected people's lives and their attitudes toward parenthood, we first need to understand *what* fatherhood and motherhood *meant* before and in how far the societal transformation changed its initial meaning. The terms *gender socialization* and *gender relations* best capture *what* might be the key element for understanding the relevant changes of family conceptions and identities in Eastern Germany.

Herein, we refer to results from research on the social history of the GDR. Scholars have found that women in the GDR, although enjoying equal rights to men in many crucial spheres of public life (labor force, law, etc.), were still expected to take over the bulk of the behavioral, emotional, and motivational tasks within the "family circle". That is, the culturally effective scripts of "Super Women and Our Good Mummies" (Merkel, 1997: 371) implied that the organization of family life, the engagement and care for children and family, the duties of education and nurture of children continued to be achieved mainly by women (Gerhard, 1994: 395). A slump in the importance of these cultural scripts that paralleled the political upheaval might then be seen as the cause for male irritation and perplexity – when it comes to own intentions to parenthood and family formation.

As such instances indicate, a future social psychological theory of gendered life-course intention-formation and decision-making will certainly need to work on two different fronts. First, on a comprehensive analysis of social and cultural conditions in the former GDR – more closely related to the "why"-question – and secondly, on an in-depth explanation of the actual factors contributing to intention and choice formation – more closely related to the "how"-question.



## Concluding remarks: what we have and what we need

Our study yielded evidence of which evaluations and judgments might be the qualifying factors for intentions to fatherhood. In linking a qualitative approach to the generic thinking of personality psychology, we regard it as a major result of our study to show that simple concepts of intention-formation and decision-making in complex societal situations should be avoided. Furthermore, we would like to repeat that a substantive decision theory for choices made under conditions of individualization is still heavily lacking, no matter how much the theorists of individualization invoke it.

From our perspective, the crucial task for future research will be to intensify the elaboration of a psychological theory on life-course decision-making. To substantiate such a theory on an empirical basis, an approach that is formed by an integration of qualitative and quantitative data, appears most rewarding to us. The following steps for instance, could be to explore the reports on male pathways in(to) relationships, because our findings recommend a closer look at the psychological life of men in modern intimate relationships. We also expect a large contribution from the inclusion of knowledge on the social history of the country under study (here: the former GDR) to demographic research. Peripheral findings of our present analysis showed that such extensions might yield the desired link between sociological and psychological views on demographic conundrums of societal change.

(main text: 8100 words)

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## Endnotes

<sup>1)</sup> Although we will apply a qualitative *psychological* method, we regard our study as being located at the intersection of psychology and sociology, and even of demography. In what follows, a variety of steps are directed towards ensuring the linkage to the various disciplines. Hereby, we pay heed to the saying by Edelstein (1999: 35; our translation) that "without psychology, sociology suffers from defective vision, whereas psychology stays mute and blind without sociology".

<sup>2)</sup> We included six more men in our sample who had just recently become fathers – with their child younger than one year. We conducted interviews also with these fathers because we did not want to limit data collection only to the specific group of interest, but also to include information on other available parts or members of the "field" (Strauss, 1987). These interviews took place at the early stage of the project. We regarded (and indeed experienced) it as particularly helpful for the construction of the interview guidelines to interview fathers of the same cohort to broaden, refine, and constantly adjust the initial guideline. This procedure proved to be indispensable to ensure adequacy of the projected range of questions for our case. Moreover, it allowed us to weigh our target interviews and our interpretation against the actual experiences of already-fathers.

<sup>3)</sup> It actually turned out to be a particularly interesting incentive "to talk" for our subjects, to raise the idea to them that they would probably have followed the "early

birth regime" of the GDR and would already have become fathers if the GDR had not faded away.

<sup>4)</sup> We want to mention for reasons of methodological accuracy, that of course one cannot "find" these dispositions "in" the interviews. Dispositions are psychological constructs which are usually measured by large test batteries, and which require standardization, and also to be tested for reliability and validity. However, we applied these concepts in terms of "sensitizing concepts" (van den Hoonaard, 1997, Marsiglio et al., 2001: 124). To work with such theoretically-derived concepts allows us to capture the possible variety of evaluative, action-related, and self-related judgments that persons might do in connection with their own future prospects and intentions.

<sup>5)</sup> In the following descriptions, we will refer to men *without* any partner as *single* men, and to married *or* cohabiting men as non-single.

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## Tables

**Table 1.** Basic descriptive data of our subjects

**Tables 2.** Characteristic qualifying patterns of values and motives in a contrasted comparison (explanation in the text)

**Table 1.** Basic descriptive data of our subjects

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Mean/ Number</b>
Age	30.9 years
Education	
Skilled worker	10
Business training	1
(Some) College	3
Current employment	
Full time employed	7
Self employed	2
In school	1
Unemployed	4
Relationship status	
Partner, married	1
Partner, cohabiting	6
Living Apart Together	none
No partner	7

**Tables 2.** Findings of characteristic qualifying patterns of values and motives in a contrasted comparison (explanation in the text)

<b><i>Results for values</i></b>	<b>Single men</b>	<b>Men in relationships</b>
Men with intentions for parenthood	Univesal values	Universal values
Men without intentions for parenthood	Pragmatic responses Few universal values	Also "individualistic" values

<b><i>Results for motives</i></b>	<b>Single men</b>	<b>Men in relationships</b>
Men with intentions for parenthood	Strong motives for fatherhood	Fewer motives
Men without intentions for parenthood	Fewer motives	Also motives that speak against fatherhood

## Figures

**Figure 1.** The development of East and West German fertility rates from 1985 to 1999.

**Figure 2.** A psychological personality model of intention formation. Chart derived from descriptions by Asendorpf (1999)

**Figure 1.** The development of Eastern and Western Germany's Total Fertility Rate (TFR) during the last 20 years (source: Council of Europe, 2001).



**Figure 2.** A psychological personality model of intention formation. Chart derived from descriptions by Asendorpf (1999)

