

Fertility intentions in low fertility countries: the case of Italy, Bulgaria, West and East Germany

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Short abstract

Despite the many differences that exist between Italy, Bulgaria and Germany, the three countries share one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe. However, they differ in the level of state support of the family and the role of informal supportive networks. Italy and Bulgaria, on the one hand, share very low levels of public support of the family. Consequently, in both countries informal supportive networks on the basis of family relationships and kinship have a strong tradition and a high relevance for getting things done. In Germany, however, support by family policy is much stronger and the relative importance of supportive networks is weaker in comparison to the other two countries. Our purpose is to understand how supportive networks influence the formation of fertility intentions in two different settings, i.e., in countries, like Italy and Bulgaria, that are characterized by a high significance of informal social support and countries, like Germany, with a prevalence of legally regulated institutional support. Moreover, we aim at evaluating whether the embeddedness in supportive networks exert gender as well as parity-specific influences on fertility intentions. The paper is, therefore, focusing on comparisons of the characteristics of supportive networks in Italy, Bulgaria and Germany and their implications on fertility intentions. We use data from the “Generations and Gender Program”, a new comparative survey that was conducted recently in all three countries.

Extended abstract

Introduction

Despite the many differences that exist between Italy, Bulgaria and Germany concerning the economic system, the historical, religious and cultural background, the three countries share one of the lowest fertility rates in Europe. In Western Germany, the decline in fertility started in the 1960s and reached below replacement level at the beginning of the 1970s. Since then it further declined to about 1,4 children per women where it stayed for the last two decades. In East Germany, no such stable decline has been observed. However, fertility also fell below replacement level at the beginning of the 1970s and did not recover afterwards. Important changes have been observed especially after the abrupt system change at the beginning of the 1990s. In Italy, the decline in fertility also started long time ago: since the second half of the 1970s - when it reached for the first time the below replacement level - it declined steadily and during the first half of the 1990s it went down to a level of 1,3 children per woman

without recovering subsequently. A sharper decline of fertility took place in Bulgaria about 20 years later. Here the Total Fertility Rate declined from 1.9 in 1989 to 1.2 children per woman in 2002.

Fertility is in most cases the outcome of purposeful behavior, i.e. it rests on the formulation of particular fertility-related intentions and situational forces that promote or impede the realization of these intentions by means of proceptive or contraceptive activities (Miller 1994). Therefore the question arises how much the low levels of fertility in Germany, Italy and Bulgaria rest on intentions to have small families and/or on intervening situational forces that hinder individuals to have their desired numbers of children. From this point of view the study of fertility intentions in countries with low fertility, as Italy, Bulgaria Germany, is of importance to understand the determinants of this phenomenon.

The decision to have a first or another child is a decision with long-term consequences that can hardly be known at the period the decision has to be made. Social structures that provide help and support, either by public institutions or by informal networks, may reduce this uncertainty. These structures are stable over a longer period of time and therefore individuals consider future help and support from these institutions or networks in their fertility-related decisions. Consequently, when support from the state is missing, social networks play a crucial role. Germany is a country with a highly developed welfare state where family policies play a crucial role in supporting young families (Bahle 1995). Therefore, intergenerational family support or other forms of social networks – although not entirely missing – are of minor importance for assisting young families. However, due to different historical backgrounds in East and West Germany, differences in the availability of institutional child care have to be observed. An under-supply of institutional child care in the western part Germany leads to a higher importance of informal networks for the provision of child care as in East Germany (Hank et al., 2004). In contrast, the lack of a welfare system that supports young families in Italy is compensated by strong intergenerational assistance from the family of origin in all the phases of the individual life-course (Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, 2004). Finally, Bulgaria is a country under transition. Since the breakdown of the socialist regime in 1989 the Bulgarian society has to face dramatic changes: the introduction of a market economy instead of a centralized one, the change in the political system from one dominant party to a multi-party democracy, dramatic economic crises, a significant raise of inequality, and the fall of the welfare system, which had a universal character at the time of Socialism (UNECE and UNFPA, 2001). However, Bulgaria has a strong tradition of supportive relationships between individuals and households that helped to overcome the permanent shortage of goods and services during socialism and that support individuals in handling the increasing costs and uncertainties in daily life after 1989.

A variety of studies already described the significance of supportive networks in Bulgaria, Poland, Hungary and Russia (Bühler and Philipov 2005, Bühler and Frateczak 2005, Philipov et al. 2004, Philipov and Shkolnikov 2001). However, these studies lead to the question whether network influences on fertility intentions are a local and temporary phenomenon of Central and Eastern European countries or whether their influence is a general one. A comparative analysis between Bulgaria, Germany and Italy can provide first answers to this question.

Theoretical focus

Intentions are a central part in theories of purposeful reproductive behavior. People act in a goal-oriented manner and these goals are formulated by intentions and cause particular proceptive or contraceptive activities in order to reach the desired goal (Miller, 1994). However, the execution of these instrumental activities is influenced by intervening unexpected factors, such as unintended pregnancies, child mortality, infertility, changing

opportunity costs (Bongaarts, 2001), which may produce a weak match between fertility intentions and reproductive behavior at the individual level. Consequently, observed levels of fertility are not a random quantity. They are an expression of reproductive intentions and of events that hinder, slow down, or promote their implementation (Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan 2003, Schoen *et al.* 1999). From an analytical point of view, it is therefore sensible to look at the determinants of intentions and of fertility outcomes separately.

Recent studies on Russia, Poland, Hungary, and Bulgaria show the positive significance of supportive resources located in social networks on fertility intentions (Buehler and Philipov, 2005, Buehler and Frateczak, 2005, Philipov *et al.* 2004, Philipov and Shkolnikov, 2001). The introduction of the structural perspective of social networks into the study of the influence of cultural and economic factors on fertility decisions in Central and Eastern Europe on the individual level offers new insights. Informal economic help and supportive relationships are viewed as strategies to cope with economic difficulties and to stabilize the economic situation of a household, which has again positive impacts on household-members' fertility-related intentions. In Italy and Germany analyses based on large representative samples about the effect of network support on fertility intentions are still missing. However, for the Italian case we can imagine that the simultaneous presence of strong personal ties to family members and kin (Dalla Zuanna and Micheli, 2004) and the lack of support from the state create the conditions that make the existence of a supportive social network a crucial factor in shaping fertility intentions of the individuals. Instead, in Germany the lower level of intergenerational support but the strong support of the state for young families would lead one to expect that social networks are of less importance to explain fertility intentions.

As fertility decisions have a prospective character, they involve the evaluation of having access to supportive resources in future. Personal networks are one long-term structural source of supportive resources. This secure or expected future access to resources through personal relationships constitutes an individual's social capital (Bourdieu, 1983). The accessible resources can be of various nature: goods, information, money, influence, power, or active help. However, only resources that support an individual in reaching his/her goals, i.e. that help him/her to meet the costs of particular courses of action, build personal social capital. This applies also to reproductive decision-making. Fertility-related social capital consists of resources that can reduce particular costs of having a child, like child care arrangements, active help in rearing children, or advice and support in the case of problems and conflict. However, also universally utilizable resources, like money, influence, or time, build fertility-related social capital as these resources help to stabilize or to improve an individual's social or economic situation, which has again an impact on his/her fertility related decisions. The latter dimension is of special importance in periods of rapid social and economic as they occurred in Bulgaria as well as in other Central and Eastern European countries.

The goals of the study are the following: First, to understand how fertility intentions are formed in Germany, Bulgaria and Italy, three countries with low fertility levels respectively. Second, to evaluate whether social networks is a relevant determinant of fertility intentions in these countries. Third, to explore whether the declared intentions to have a first or another child are more consistent with a stabilization of the current levels of fertility in Bulgaria, Germany and Italy or whether they indicate a further decline.

Data and Research methods

The data come from the Italian multipurpose household survey on "Family and Social Subjects", carried out in 2003, from the study "Inquiry on Generations and Genders" for Bulgaria, conducted in 2004 and from the German "Generations and Gender Survey" carried out in 2005. The three surveys are part of the international Generations and Gender Program,

which aims at a cross-national, comparative, and longitudinal study of the dynamics of the family and family relationships in industrialized countries. Data from the surveys rest on samples that are representative for the particular national populations. The Italian survey provides information about 49,451 respondents of all age groups, the Bulgarian study covers 12,824 individuals aged 18-79 and the German survey 10,017 individuals aged 18-79.

All surveys provide in depth information about the compositions of the respondents' social networks, about the exchange relationships of monetary and non-monetary support they are embedded in, and about the respondents' intentions to have a first or another child within the next two years.

The empirical analyses concentrate on gender-specific and parity-specific fertility intentions, i.e. we study the intentions of male and female respondents to have a first child, second, or third child within the next three years. The explanatory variables consider characteristics of the respondents (age, marital status, education, job condition, characteristics of the job), characteristics of the couple (marriage duration, place of residence, common income) and the size and composition of fertility related social capital in the form of supportive exchange relationships (for example, economic help, child assistance, house work). The analysis will be conducted separately for all three countries.

Expected findings

Contrary to Germany, Italy and Bulgaria have a weak welfare system, even if due to different reasons. Historically, Italy has received little support from state institutions and has relied more on family support. Bulgaria has quickly passed from a socialist regime to a democratic society; the previous generalized state support to families has collapsed and people had to rely on themselves to cope with their everyday life.

In our view we expect that in Germany informal networks are of less importance in general, except informal childcare in West Germany, as previous studies have highlighted. In Italy and Bulgaria we expect not only the informal support may have more influence on fertility decisions, but also that the differences in family support may also concern the size and the kind of the support. For Italy, non-monetary support, such as child care from people that do not live in the household, can be crucial in fertility related decisions or, perhaps, more influential than monetary support. Despite the cultural changes in the younger generations towards lower fertility rates, reproductive intentions in Bulgaria may be more influenced by the availability of an economic support from the social network.

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