

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

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**Abstract**

Recent calls 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 to become parents. The context for this research is the societal situation of contemporary Eastern Germany, where birth rates have faced a historical low – the lowest in more than 10 years. Our innovative analytical paradigm draws on 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 with men's intentions for parenthood. We compare our results with explanations given by the Theory of Symbolic Self-Completion and the Theory of Reasoned Action. We argue for the need to bring together psychological and sociological theorizing in this field.

Keywords: Demography, qualitative psychology, birth rate, fertility, men, fatherhood, East Germany

## Introduction

Our paper reports on the characteristics and determinants of men's intentions for parenthood in Eastern Germany. It 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 behaviour. They argue that more research into male reproductive behaviour should lead to an increase in 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 in various disciplines, including demography and sociology, have called for the application of 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 criticized at their weak points of argumentation for applying a "much too simple, home-made psychology" (Burkart, 1994: 63).

Our paper takes up both threads and thus it follows the recommendation by Marsiglio et al. (2001) 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 use selected quantitative information related to our respondents, our study is primarily of a *qualitative calibre*, 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 of or deterrents to becoming a father ?
- Which factors can explain men's intention-formation? Which psychological theory can help us in understanding the empirical patterns of men's desire to have children, their intentions, their behaviour, 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 our own approach and research questions are rooted. We will then briefly report on the exceptional demographic and social context of Eastern Germany, in which our interview study was conducted in 2001. Following that, we discuss our sample, the applied method, and the procedures for the analysis of the data, before presenting the results of our analysis. The concluding sections summarize our findings and readdress the original question of modes of psychological interpretation in an multidisciplinary context.<sup>1)</sup>

### **Men and their intentions of family-formation**

Our knowledge of motives, intentions, and desires of men regarding fatherhood is relatively limited. In discussing the role that men play in the process of family formation, the metaphors that authors use to depict this situation sometimes read like the description of a ghost train. One finds characterizations of men as "shadows" (Bledsoe, 2000), "invisible" (Coley, 2001), "timid beings" (Roeder, 1994), and "acute-decliners" (Goldscheider & Kaufman, 1996). Sometimes men appear only in a "back-lighting" (Ventimiglia, 1997). In contrast, the literature on women in this field of study is much more developed and 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 to parenthood from the available recent literature on "men and fatherhood". In a German literature review of the late 1980s, Kuehler (1989) points out that a substantive study on this issue is lacking, and that some scholars even tend to negate the existence of a genuine desire for men to have children (cf. Fichtner, 1999). 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 shall report on some of the most important findings from this literature 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 attempt to explore 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).

This literature strongly suggests that it is worthwhile to include men in research on family-formation and parenthood. As a consequence of this knowledge and concepts of men as fathers, these studies led us to explicitly design an approach that explores 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 need for this kind of research is also confirmed by the results of a theoretical examination of this topic by Tanfer & Mott (1998).

*Psychoanalytical and counselling literature.* There is a substantial literature that examines men and their desire to have children from a psychoanalytical standpoint (Anthony & Benedek, 1970, Frick-Bruder & Schuett, 1992, Schlottner, 1998). The literature also examines men from the perspective of therapeutic or counselling

experiences, and considers the motivation to have children 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 advice given about applied *interview guidelines* and *practical experiences* suggests that we should take into account specific characteristics of interviews with men on this subject. We have learnt from this that men tend to give somewhat stereotypical or elusive answers when asked about their desire to have children of their own. It appears that this is a 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 for our own study, comprises mainly sociological and demographic integrative studies on the fertility-related *behaviour* of men. As already indicated in this article, there is no systematic research programme that considers men as "procreative beings" (Marsiglio 1998). Thus, we have had to make use of the eclectic findings from this literature in what has also been an eclectic way. In a recent review Coleman (2000) summarizes current knowledge concerning male fertility from demographic and biological studies. He concludes that, ultimately, his overview can do little more than confirm the long-standing criticism made by demographers: that male fertility and reproduction are unjustly ignored (Coleman 2000: 55).

For Germany, the literature provides us with basic descriptive data on men's reproductive behaviour. These come from research in the context of the Family and Fertility Survey (Pohl, 1995). Results show that the average age of first becoming a father is around 30 in West Germany, and 25 in East Germany. Two-thirds of West and

East German men, in the below-25 age group, say that either they or their partner use contraceptives, although they mostly seem to rely on their female partner's contraceptive practice. The study also finds a slight regional 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 highlights another finding which is of particular interest for our study; namely the high percentage of responses that indicate uncertainty about 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, still remain 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 distinguishes 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. One of the main conclusions of his work, which we adopted in this study, was to point out the necessity of a diachronic (life-course) investigation into the development of men's desire to father children.

Similarly, Strauss & Goldberg (1999) have formulated an important theoretical insight. Drawing on their empirical study, they are able to demonstrate the major impact that men's views of themselves *before* the birth of their first child has on 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 having a child might itself be influenced by such self-views. The need for the inclusion of questions on people's self-concept in our research design was a conclusion that we drew from Strauss and Goldberg's finding.

In recent years, William Marsiglio has contributed extensively to knowledge of 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 about contraception and impregnation. They base their methods on concepts derived from Symbolic Interactionism and Grounded Theory, and they convincingly demonstrate 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 does not adequately reflect contemporary social psychological theories of action.

As this brief review of the 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 the understanding of the mechanisms of male parenthood intention-formation.

### **The East German 'fertility crisis'**

In this section, we briefly outline the exceptional demographic context 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 this effect have been proposed, ranging from 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 (although these are 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 how fertility rates have declined exceptionally abruptly.

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

For our study, we considered it particularly interesting to interview men whose demographic behaviour; in particular their desire to father children, their notions of fatherhood, and their intentions towards family formation, could be expected to be affected by this societal upheaval. We identified the cohorts of the early 1970's as a particularly appropriate sample. Whilst they had been educated during 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 the unification of the country. With regard to childbearing, we can classify this cohort as a "post-unification cohort", that is, hardly any of its members would have established a family before unification (Kreyenfeld, 2001: 104).

Based on these considerations, we thought it was possible 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. In addition,

the social context supported our choice of a qualitative approach to the research, allowing us to picture "a personal jumble" of life orientations as well.

## **Methods**

The sample for the empirical investigation stems from the Rostock Longitudinal Study; 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 in 1970, and its purpose is to determine the biological, social and psychological risk factors for the lifelong development of children. The initial sample consisted of 1,000 new-born 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.

The sample for our qualitative in-depth study comprises twenty male participants in the longitudinal study. We selected people who agreed on a voluntary basis to additional interviews outside the normal schedule of the panel. A post-interview analysis of this random sample showed that the participants in our study do not differ significantly from the rest of the panel with regard to various characteristics (for instance, education, parental background, social competence, intelligence, personality). As a result we do not have to assume that the results of our research have been substantially influenced by sample selectivity.

Against this background, our male respondents were part of 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, namely to

probe men on their conceptions of fatherhood and intentions *before* they experienced their (first) transition. A brief description of the target sample appears in Table 1.<sup>2)</sup>

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

We decided to choose a method that was both well founded as a psychological approach and well suited to the difficulties of the topic that were discussed in the theoretical section above. Thus, we selected the Problem-Centred 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 derived from Glaser and Strauss's Grounded Theory, goes further than its predecessors by the use of a detailed and psychologically refined apparatus of question-styles and communicative strategies. In general, a PCI resembles the style of client-centred therapy (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*. Witzel's approach provides a differentiation of *general* from *specific explorations*, and of *communication strategies* which *generate storytelling* from those which *generate understanding*. These concepts allowed us to ensure the best balance between structure and openness in our interviews (Witzel 2000: paragraph 11ff.; cf. Mey, 1999).

In addition., we handed out a brief questionnaire to collect basic socio-demographic data immediately after the interview. The core instrument of data collection, however, was an extensive interview guideline, which encompassed all the topics, questions, and working hypotheses that we brought as "inevitable previous knowledge" (Witzel 2000) with us to the interview. We did not use 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, 2000: paragraph 8). The aim of all these considerations, methods, and techniques was to facilitate maximum validity and authenticity within the interviews.

We questioned our interviewees on three main groups of topics:

- (a) *Becoming a father*. Questions addressed issues such as thinking for the first time about forming their own family; their personal history of wanting to have children; characteristics and the time-scale of family formation considerations; reasons and counter-reasons; the quality of the current desire to become a father; personal pre-conditions for a "yes" to parenthood; the decision-making process; the role of the partner; and anticipation of future talks about parenthood.

(b) *Being a father*. Here the 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 ideal number of children; and expected changes of having "more than one" child.

(c) *Interaction with a partner or other people*. Here the questions addressed issues such as the quality and characteristics of talks with their partner about children ; the distribution of interests; the reasons for 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 the discussion of the pros and cons of children; interaction with friends or relatives about this topic; the influence of other people on one's own decision-making; and the role that parents, friends, and relatives (might) play.

A separate section of the interviews was dedicated to the subjects' experiences of the ongoing societal transformation and to the question of how far they perceived that these changes had altered their attitude towards having their own family.<sup>3)</sup> Each of these topics was probed in detail by means of the PCI interview techniques. The interviews lasted between one and two hours each. Transcripts of the taped interviews formed the starting point for the analysis of the interview data.

The crucial element for the analysis of qualitative interviews is the *analytical paradigm* (also termed *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 an approach based on Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). This method suggests that the analyst should refine the initial ("open") coding of the text by subsequently inquiring about the *conditions, context, strategies, and consequences* of a given question. These four concepts form the *axial coding strategy*, as described by Strauss & Corbin (1990: 99).

Used alone, 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 allows. As a result we decided to refer to psychological concepts of personality in the axial coding procedure. Here, the focus is 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 shown 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 towards political parties, but also towards children or "being a parent".
- (b) *Values*. Values are defined as dispositional evaluations of broad classes of concepts. Some examples of values are "equality", "honesty", or "charity".

- (c) *Motives*. Motives are defined as dispositional evaluations of consequences of actions. Examples of motives include "intimacy" or "power".
- (d) *Interests*. Interests are defined as dispositional evaluations of actions. Examples include whether you enjoy playing chess rather than football, playing with toddlers rather than helping your son or daughter in maths.
- (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 made 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 aspire 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 might all affect intention-formation. The empirical connections (or linkages) between observed concepts and intentions will be the central focus of our analysis of the results.<sup>4)</sup>

## **Results**

The initial analysis revealed a great diversity of narratives in our sample. Initially, we were sceptical about whether there would be a sufficient variation of statements from men of the same age group (and arguably of similar living conditions). We were, however, surprised by the variety of memories, descriptions, thoughts, wishes, and concerns that men used in connection with stories about their desires to have children. In order to provide an initial overall view of our respondents, we describe some general similarities and characteristics of the interviews.

First, of the 14 men who were not parents there was *only one* who described himself as being anti-parenthood. The others, even those 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 should "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" approach to 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, in a somewhat contradictory manner, our respondents 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) expectation in Eastern Germany that people will become parents. Almost all participants spoke of their own parents' (mostly mothers') claims and wishes for grandchildren. At the same time, however, our subjects expressed a general disregard of these parental wishes and, instead, insisted that *this* decision was a highly personal one. In other words, the men in our sample tended to be amused by these parental "hints" rather than attaching any particular importance to them.

For the display of more detailed results, we have applied a *contrasting comparative case study approach* in order to highlight the factors which determine fatherhood intentions. That is, we compare two broad groups, 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; author's italics). Within these two groups, individual cases are contrasted between those men with intentions toward parenthood with men without such intentions. Only men who clearly expressed the view that they wanted to become a father at some time in their life were assigned to the intention group.

In the following paragraphs, we consider 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.* At the level of attitudes, as defined above, research on male intention-formation deals with many conflicting views that men have about children and their own fatherhood. The results showed that any expectation of 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 allows for many different and conflicting attitudes. We found the following links which applied both to single men and to men in steady relationships:

- (a) The quality of the attitude towards children in general, and towards the expected consequences of having a child, was not shown as a qualifying factor for either the intention to become a parent or for the intention to avoid parenthood.
- (b) The same holds true for the quality of attitudes toward an upper age limit for becoming a father. The acceptance and acknowledgement of the existence of such a limit did not automatically result in an intention to follow it.
- (c) We found another important connection between the quality of men's relationships with their partner and their commitment to her life plans with their own intentions. Being with a partner who has a clear intention to be a parent did not mean that our respondents would also develop their own intention to become a parent. These factors were independent of each other. But conversely, single men with family

intentions reported that they would not engage in a serious relationship with a woman who did not want children at all.

- (d) We found a substantial differentiating factor, however, in the reported attitude toward the family formation of peers. Only men who intended to become a parent considered the observed family formation of others as positive. Negative aspects of this peer behaviour were pointed out by those who did not intend to become fathers.
- (e) Characteristically men with no family intentions positively evaluated a "young lifestyle" (i.e., going out often, meeting spontaneously with friends, no long-term planning), which the presence of a child would largely constrain. Only men with clear parenthood intentions reported that they had already moved away from this lifestyle — irrespective of whether they were in a relationship or not.

*Values.* There was clear differentiation between the observed patterns of the level of values between single and non-single men. In the group of single men, only those with clear family intentions reported values that guided 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 children, 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 having children, but not to an individualistic life-style.

*Motives.* The search for and examination of motives proved to be a powerful tool in our analysis. There was a large range of evaluated anticipated consequences of parenthood in the single and the non-single groups. Here also, single men who intended to become parents showed a wide variety of anticipated positive outcomes arising from family formation. These outcomes included the achievement of a life with more meaning happiness and vitality in life security maintenance of family tradition a contribution to self-actualiation and the avoidance of loneliness. No negatively-evaluated consequences were found here at all.

There was less available information from non-single men and a larger proportion of anticipated negative outcomes, including for instance, the expected probable reduction in options as a result of fatherhood. This finding could be a hint of a general striving for self-completion that is particularly felt by single men, but less strongly so by men in steady relationships. Single men seem to strive to achieve something, whereas non-single men seem to avoid unfavourable 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 to be parents reported a wide range of activities that they would like to do with their child. For instance, to play and to make things with a child, to fulfil joyfully "all these parental duties", or to "explain the world to the child" were mentioned favourably by men who aspired to parenthood. By contrast, such reports occupied only a marginal place in the reports of men who were non-intenders.

*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 substantially to the findings regarding interests and motives. This is exactly as the theoretical plot would predict. The *intenders* articulated notions such as to "pass on something" to a child, to be a responsible and good father, to be a "100%-dad", and 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 position by pointing out that he "does not regard family as a goal as such".

*Action beliefs.* Action beliefs were an important part of the story men had to tell. Ultimately, we reached this conclusion because of the richness of descriptions, as well as the centrality of these passages within the story told in the interview. We found narratives of neutrally or negatively experienced dissociation from the "kids topic", of the "unimaginability" of children (although respondents did not have objections to 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 fulfilment of their own desire to have children. The *intenders* in steady relationships in particular seemed to be mentally involved in the 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 is also revealed in the interviews. Action-beliefs are important, almost indispensable, in understanding the individual case, but we found only one clear-cut correlation with intentions. It seemed that the closer and more realistic the individual implementation of intentions, the more positive and realistic actions and expectations prevailed. It was not possible, however, to substantiate any further links.

*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 reported that they aspired to parenthood had particularly negative evaluations of living a future life without their own children. In other words, only men who could imagine living a life without children had (or could afford to have) no intentions of becoming a parent.

A wide variety of further self-descriptions was given which we were able to arrange 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 to becoming a parent or not.

*Two additional findings.* In addition to the concepts that we discuss above, two additional details which present amen-specific perspective on childraising intentions were present in the research findings. 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 was present in the reports of *intenders* and of *non-intenders*. It refers to the experience of emotional distance to the whole "family business", or even the "unimaginability" of having one's own children. For instance, respondent Mr. P. (an intender) said:

"Nobody ever has prepared me for this [potential parenthood] (...) 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 interviews we frequently heard statements such as "I somehow cannot really imagine what it means to have a child": many of our men found it difficult to develop a detailed idea or 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. The first extract is from the interview with Mr. B. (an intender) who suggests that women are less interested in children than they used to be:

"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)

This view is also reflected in the account of Mr. H. (a non-intender) who discusses female friends whose positive attitude to children seems to differ from the majority of women:

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

From our perspective, it would be a rewarding step to analyse perceptions of this kind in more detail. But we have had regard to the limitations of our paper and accordingly restricted our remarks to the suggestion that changing gender roles in East Germany after unification may possibly be relevant. We shall return to this topic in the concluding section of this article.

### **Summary: A contrasting comparison of the findings**

It proved to be an important step for our analysis 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 with the respondents' intentions for parenthood.

On the level of *general family-related attitudes* and attitudes towards the anticipated changes of the self-concept, we initially found a rather mixed and ambiguous linkage between positive and negative attitudes towards children and towards intending to become a parent. 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* were inclined to report that they had relinquished this attitude and life-style. Also, the quality of attitudes toward the family formation of their peers was directly linked to their own intentions. Moreover, we found similar results in examining interests. Only *intenders* demonstrated positive evaluations of child-related activities (i.e., interests), whereas the *non-intenders* did not, or reported scepticism or a lack of interest.

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

First, at the level of values, the answers of respondents who were single and wanted a child appeared more complex and detailed. We recognised this as having taken a *developmental step* from an individualistic and pragmatic philosophy of life towards 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. In the *non-intenders* group, in addition to the values discussed above, we found some values that would contradict a desire for 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, while considering motives we found similar results, which depicted the intention-formation of men in an even more precise way. Where men reported positively evaluated *consequences* of family formation, there was a link to an intention to become a father. We found this link particularly strong in the group of single men. It could be argued that these men strongly hope to gain benefits from forming a family, for instance, a life with more meaning and less loneliness. For the group of single men the proposition 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 the negative consequences of parenthood. They substantiated their lack of intention by referring to negative consequences. Taken together, these specific results can be depicted in Table 2. The implications of these findings will be considered discussed in the discussion section below.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Furthermore, our analysis came up with two additional specific findings. These show possible *peculiarities* in the male perspective, which have only been occasionally

noted in previous research. First, we found that men were distanced from issues of family due to their male-role socialization. Secondly, men recognized 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 important for men. Moreover, these findings, in turn, pointed to the exceptional social situation that applied to our respondents. They had been socialized in a different state than the one in which they currently have to face relationship and family choices. This insight and its possible consequences for an applicable theory will be discussed in the following section.

### **Towards a psychological theory of men's fertility 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 substantial part of the answer. By applying this 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, mostly by parental and peer influences. Once such evaluations and beliefs are gained (internalized), they impact on the individual.

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 of *why* these observed connections hold (de Bruijn, 1999). 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 behaviour.

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, behaviour, or actions), that signal one's self-defining achievement. Examples 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, favour 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 discussed a smaller range of motives and self-conceptions. Their interests and action-beliefs, in contrast, were more pronounced. Considering that they largely accepted their partner's intentions and family planning, the *Theory of Planned Behaviour* might be appropriate to explain the stories that were related. In this theory, people's intentions are

a combination of attitudes, subjective norms, and perceived action control (Ajzen, 1991, 2002). The best examples of this form of intention-formation were the *intenders* in steady relationships. They provided many 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. having 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 striving for symbolic self-completion through having 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 single-group of intenders 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**

Where is the linkage of our results with the societal situation which provided the context for our research ? Our subjects themselves hinted at their perceptions of this context. The extracts from the interviews of Mr. B., Mr. H., and Mr. P. on their perception of male isolation and of a change of female life-orientations (see the section on "*Two 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 has 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 how far the societal transformation changed that original 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.

This section refers to results from research on the social history of the German Democratic Republic (GDR). Scholars have found that women in the GDR, although enjoying equal rights to men in many crucial spheres of public life (labour force, law, etc.), were still expected to take over the bulk of the behavioural, emotional, and motivational tasks within the "family circle". That is, the culturally effective discourses of "Super Women and Our Good Mummies" (Merkel, 1997: 371) implied that the organization of family life, the engagement with and care for children and family, the duties of education and nurture of children continued to be achieved mainly by women (Gerhard, 1994). A decline in the importance of these cultural discourses that paralleled

the political upheaval might then be seen as the cause for male irritation and confusion – when it comes to their own intentions towards parenthood and family formation.

As these instances suggest, a future social psychological theory of gendered life-course intention-formation and decision-making, which has yet to appear, will certainly need to operate 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.

Our study yielded evidence about which evaluations and judgments might be the qualifying factors for men to intend becoming fathers. 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 reiterate that a substantive decision theory for choices made under conditions of individualization is still awaited, 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. In order to substantiate such a theory on an empirical basis an approach that is based on an integration of qualitative and quantitative data appears to be most rewarding. One way forward 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 anticipate that a substantial contribution could be made by the inclusion of knowledge about the social history of the country under study (in

this case the former GDR) in demographic research. The 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.

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### **Notes**

<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 linkage to the various disciplines. In this way we take account of the argument of 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 recently become fathers – their children were less than one year old. We conducted these interviews because we did not want to limit data collection only to the specific group of interest, but wanted to include information as well about other available parts or members of the "field"



(Strauss, 1987). These interviews took place at the early stage of the project. The interviews provided an opportunity to pilot the interview guidelines and were particularly helpful for the construction of the final version. The draft was incrementally broadened, refined, and adjusted in the light of the experience of its use. This procedure proved to be indispensable to ensure the adequacy of the projected range of questions for the main phase of data collection. Moreover, it allowed us to compare the target interviews and our interpretation of findings against the actual experiences of those who were already fathers.

<sup>3)</sup> It actually turned out to be a particularly interesting interview technique "to talk" for our subjects, to raise with them the idea that they would probably have followed the "early birth regime" of the GDR and would already have become fathers if the GDR had not disappeared.

<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, require standardization, and also need 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 have 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

**Table 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

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

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

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

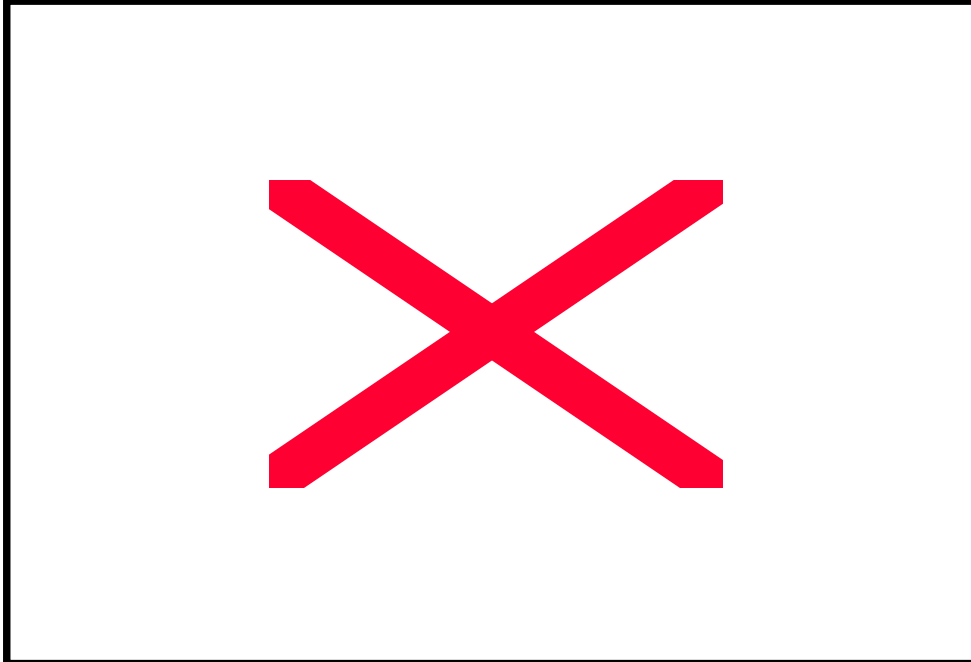
## Figures

**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)

