

Partner Effects on Fertility Desires: stimulating and dampening effects of Happy and Unhappy Relationships

Childbearing is typically a two-person endeavor, with fertility outcomes heavily influenced by the dynamics within a couple. When examining partner effects on fertility, one of the most general and obvious findings is that people are much more likely to have children when in a partnership compared to when they are not. Being in a relationship, especially a stable one, increases the likelihood of having children, as a partnership often provides the social and economic support conducive to childbearing. However, within partnerships, the dynamics between partners can also have important effects on fertility.

Recent studies have highlighted how mismatching fertility intentions can effect subsequent childbearing. In recent years, another important aspect that has gained more attention is the effect of relationship *quality* on fertility desires and outcomes (Perelli-Harris & Blom 2022). However, this the empirical and theoretical evidence regarding the association between relationship quality and fertility remains mixed, in part due to the paucity of studies.

In their survey of the literature, Balbo et al. (2012) highlight two competing schools of thought. One is that higher relationship satisfaction or relationship quality would be positively related to fertility, as the couple would be more likely to believe the relationship had a strong foundation and long-term potential. However, there are also two mechanisms by which the association might be less straightforward. One theory suggests that childbearing might be seen as a strategy to reduce uncertainty in an unstable relationship and to enhance solidarity between partners (Friedman, et al., 1994). In this case, couples who are experiencing lower relationship satisfaction might believe that having a child could stabilize their relationship or bring them closer together. Thus, a lower 'quality' relationship may be positively associated with fertility.

In addition, if a relationship is very happy the couple may fear that the arrival of a child could cause strain on the relationship and lead to lower relationship satisfaction. Very high levels of relationship satisfaction would then be associated with lower fertility. There is some evidence for this effect in quantitative studies (Rijken & Liefbroer 2009; Rijken & Thomson 2011) , as well as qualitative studies (Sassler, et al 2009).

Our study uses data from the Household Income and Labour Dynamics in Australia (HILDA) survey, to examine the effect of relationship satisfaction on fertility desires. HILDA is a large scale longitudinal household panel survey conducted in Australia. The survey interviews respondents annually and we use data from the first wave in 2001 until 2019. Our sample is selected to include childless respondents who are in a relationship. The final sample size is 3,578 men and 3,774 women , with an average age of 29.7 years. As individual are followed over time we have a multilevel data structure with 24,703 observation years.

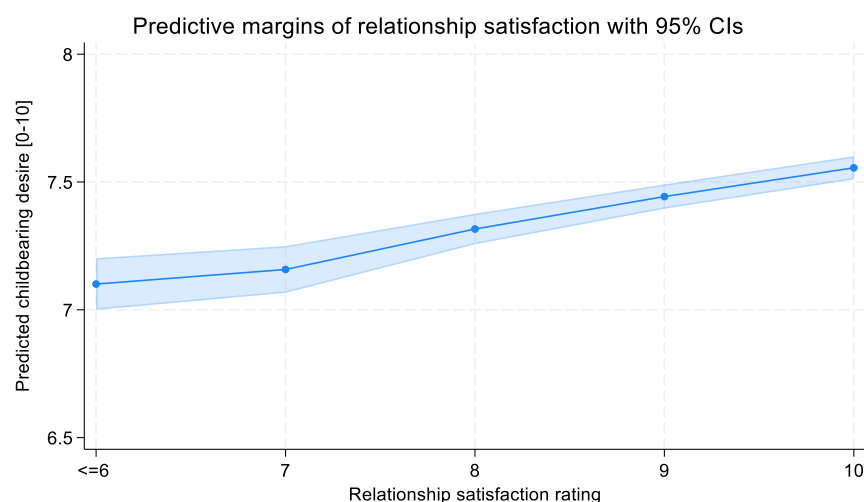
The dependent variable in our analysis is childbearing desire. This variable is from a question which asks "Would you like to have a child of your own in the future? " with the answer option being a scale of 0-10: where 0 means 'definitely does not want children' and to 10 equals 'very much wants children'. The main independent variable of interest is relationship satisfaction, which is also measured on a scale from 0 (completely unsatisfied) to 10 (completely satisfied). The question on relationship satisfaction was asked in a self-completion questionnaire which had more sensitive questions that might be difficult to answer in the presence of other household members. Due to the relatively small number of respondents who reported

extremely low levels of relationship satisfaction, we grouped all responses of 6 or lower into a single category and treated this variable as categorical in our analysis.

In addition to relationship satisfaction, we included other measures of satisfaction in our model, such as financial satisfaction, satisfaction with the home one lives in, and satisfaction with leisure time. We also controlled for other key covariates, including age and education, which are known to be associated with fertility desires.

We employed a fixed-effects regression to examine how variation in childbearing desire is associated with changes in relationship satisfaction over time. This method allows us to account for unobserved individual differences that may influence both relationship satisfaction and fertility desires, providing a more robust test of the relationship between these variables.

We find a significant and positive effect of relationship satisfaction on childbearing desires. Specifically, within the same person, higher levels of relationship satisfaction are associated with a greater desire to have children. This relationship appears to be linear suggesting that as relationship satisfaction increases, so does the desire for children, without a tipping point at which satisfaction becomes so high that fertility desires decline. This can be seen in the predictive margins from the fixed effect regression shown in the figure below.



These findings support the idea that relationship satisfaction plays a critical role in shaping fertility intentions, with higher satisfaction encouraging childbearing. However, our results do not provide support for the hypothesis that very high levels of relationship satisfaction might dampen fertility desires out of concern for preserving relationship quality. Instead, our findings suggest that satisfied couples are more likely to see children as a natural next step in their relationship, rather than as a threat to their current satisfaction. Although we did not find this relationship in our data, given the complexity of childbearing decision making it is of course very likely that this does remain an internal concern for many people in happy relationship.

This study contributes to the growing body of literature on the role of relationship quality in fertility decisions. By using longitudinal data and a fixed-effects approach, we add to the small but growing literature on the effects of relationship quality and satisfaction on the fertility process, in this case specifically looking at childbearing desires.

References

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