

Family Formation in Times of Labor Market Insecurities

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Abstract

Family formation is still a major life goal for an overwhelming section of the population in contemporary societies. It is a major transition in the individual life course because bringing up children in modern societies is a challenging and costly task. Men and women are increasingly aware of this fact. That is why family formation is no longer taken for granted as an obligatory marker of the transition to adulthood. It is increasingly a matter of conscious decision making—at least in modern societies. One would expect economic uncertainty to be a major issue in this decision. Labor market insecurity in particular should prevent couples from realizing family formation and impact the timing of childbirth or the likelihood of remaining childless.

There are plenty of historical examples showing that in times of economic crisis and major societal instability birthrates decline considerably. However, more recent studies in various countries show mixed evidence in regard to the impact of economic uncertainty and labor market insecurity on family formation. The puzzle of these partially seemingly contradictory findings has not yet been solved. Obviously, the relationship between labor market insecurity and family formation is more complex than has been assumed. It is the result of a complex interplay between historical factors and traditions, current socioeconomic conditions of the lives of men and women, and their personal ways of dealing with risks and uncertainties.

INTRODUCTION

Family formation has considerable consequences for the life course of men and women. Raising children in modern societies is a challenging and costly task. As it is no longer an obligatory experience in the life course of men and women, it is more and more a matter of conscious decision making. Couples weigh up the pros and cons of having a child under the given and expected circumstance of their lives. Before taking responsibility for a child they want to be confident that they can count on sound and stable economic conditions in the future. There are two major reasons for this: Individuals or couples want to meet their aspirations in regard to bringing up their children. Gainful employment as the primary source of household income is needed to bear

the costs of parenting. At the same time, parents want to continue pursuing other personal life goals after family formation. Among others these include the desire of fathers and mothers to stay gainfully employed and further their career. A stable job and an opportune labor market definitely lower the risk of economic hardship. Good prospects for both partners in the labor market are perceived as an important prerequisite for having children. Therefore, the general hypothesis is that economic insecurity prevents couples from realizing family formation. Consequently, it should at least impact the timing of childbirth. Economic insecurity can affect the likelihood of having a child if prospects in the labor market are uncertain for a longer period of time and family formation would imply too high risks in the future life course.

However, it could also be the other way round. Economic uncertainty over the life course could motivate family formation because it can be a kind of strategy to establish a stable social context with clear responsibilities and duties. Women with low-level qualifications are hit particularly hard by economic crises and high risks of unemployment. They might find more and strong fulfillments in caring for a family instead of facing an insecure and unsatisfactory work life.

Obviously, the relationship between labor market insecurity and family formation is complex. Its manifestation in fertility behavior is the result of the interplay between historical factors and cultural traditions, the level of social security provided by welfare states, current socioeconomic conditions of the life course, gender, family-related preferences, and the individual way of dealing with risks and uncertainties. Simple answers cannot be expected.

It is said that in times of globalization and weak social policy regimes, people have to cope with steady changes in the labor market, implying more instability and an increasing need for flexibility and mobility. At the same time, the ability of the welfare state to protect its citizens against the risks of economic insecurity and poverty is diminishing. That is why the question of how labor market insecurity affects family formation is highly relevant. This is particularly true because we can expect that in spite of or even as a reaction to these trends, the need for stable family relationships will not diminish. Therefore, we are faced with a paradox: Economic insecurity makes long-term commitment to a family more risky, but at the same time it amplifies the need for a family that provides authentic relationships.

FOUNDATIONAL RESEARCH

Economic living conditions, labor market insecurity, and unemployment risks are assumed to have an impact on family planning over the life course. But empirical analyses show that this is not true under all circumstances and the most significant effects identified have been those on the timing

of family formation. Theories on the mechanisms that could explain the relevance of economic and labor market conditions for individual fertility behavior have so far not provided a general and valid framework. Things are obviously far more complex than has been assumed.

An inspection of long-term levels of aggregated fertility shows that in historical periods of severe economic or social crises a drop in period-specific fertility rates can be observed in many countries. Even though this coincidence does not always emerge, or at least not to the same extent, it is reasonable to assume a causal link between economic development, labor market dynamics, and family formation. However, historical and internationally comparative studies show mixed evidence in detail (Sobotka, Skirbekk, & Philipov, 2011).

A prime example of an economic crisis, which has been investigated extensively in regard to its consequences for fertility and family formation, is the Great Depression of the early 1930s. The Great Depression led to unprecedented levels of unemployment and poverty in many countries of the world. In the United States, the decline in fertility rates during this historical time was considerable. Most scholars of demography agree that low birth rates were related to economic hardship and experiences of unemployment suffered by huge sections of the population (Rindfuss, Morgan, & Swicegood, 1988). In European countries such as Germany and Sweden, the decrease in fertility rates was also significant, whereas in France, which was hit less strongly by the crisis, hardly any drop in fertility rates was observed (Kreyenfeld, Andersson, & Pailhé, 2012).

Compared to the Great Depression, the years at the end of or immediately after the two World Wars in the twentieth century are less intensively investigated. These periods stand for societal catastrophes that affected the whole social system and were also accompanied by severe economic hardship. In Germany, fertility rates dropped sharply immediately after the end of World War I and II, but recovered quickly. The same is true for France, but at the end of World War II only on a moderate level. Research on the consequences of the economic crisis in the early 1970s (oil price shock) brought no clear evidence for causal effects on family formation. Even though in the United States, for example, fertility rates deviated negatively from the long-term trend, more detailed studies do not support the assumption that the crisis had a decisive impact (Butz & Ward, 1979).

Research also shows an interdependence of fertility with the business cycle, which is characterized by changing labor market opportunities, differently high unemployment rates and different degrees of job insecurity. In times when the compatibility of family and employment was a more critical issue for women than it is today, studies found evidence of a counter-cyclical relationship between the business cycle and fertility (Butz & Ward, 1979). Better

prospects in the labor market that women could also profit from led to higher opportunity cost of caring for children. Between the 1960s and the 1990s the relationship between female labor force participation and fertility changed in many countries. If the conditions for reconciling work and family are good, fertility and the business cycle are related in a procyclical way. In Sweden, for example, the economic recession and increasing labor market insecurity in the 1990s—as well as cuts in family-related benefits by the Swedish state—led to a decline in family formation. After recovering from the recession, Swedish fertility rates went up again (Andersson, 2000). That the absence of labor market insecurity in combination with good conditions for reconciling work and family favors early family formation is also supported by the fact that in the former socialist countries of Eastern Europe, as with the GDR, the age at family formation was unprecedentedly low (Huinink & Kreyenfeld, 2006).

In general, it is a difficult task to disentangle the effects of economic and labor market insecurity on birth rates from the long-term trend of declining fertility in developed countries. It is not clear to what extent these trends are driven by cultural or economic factors. One strand of research argues that this trend toward a secular decline in fertility in developed countries since the late 1960s can be explained by changing and globalizing economies which introduce more insecurity in labor markets and increase demands for flexibility and mobility that particularly hit young adults (Blossfeld, Klijzing, Mills, & Kurz, 2005). Another strand of research emphasizes the role of noneconomic factors, such as value change and the changing roles of women in societies (Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004).

Obviously, economic insecurity may lead to different reactions according to family formation. But some typical patterns have been identified quite clearly. The usual case seems to be that men and women postpone births during a period of economic uncertainty. Fertility is recuperated in later years to a degree that depends on the age individuals are confronted with with existential insecurity. This can be observed, for instance, in the case of the societal transformation in Eastern Europe. Here, a rapid postponement of childbirth took place. This was the major reason for a sharp drop in fertility rates. However, obviously some couples decided against family formation or extension at all, which resulted in a lower mean number of children born over the life course and higher rates of childlessness (Huinink & Kreyenfeld, 2006).

Another well-proven finding is that labor market insecurity hinders men in particular from having children. Lower educated and economically disadvantaged men also marry at an older age and stay unmarried at a higher rate. They are not regarded as attractive because they cannot and are not expected to guarantee a satisfactory standard of living. This was particularly true at times when the male breadwinner model was the dominant pattern of the

couples' household production. The baby boom after World War II, therefore, was mainly due to the fact that the economic prospects for young men were promising: It was a time of economic prosperity and they could expect a lifelong stable occupational career. The decision to start a family could be made relatively early in the life course (Morgan, 1996).

To sum up: We learn from previous research that economic insecurity had a different impact on fertility in different countries in times of societal or economic crises, that men and women are affected differently, and that the age at which individuals are affected by periodical shocks makes a difference in regard to their short-term family formation behavior and long-term fertility. There is clear evidence that severe economic insecurity accompanied by deep economic crises or societal "catastrophes" leads to a significant postponement of births. Evidence is also strong that from the era of the male breadwinner system as the model for the family's household production until today particularly men suffer from economic disadvantages. One important question is, however, what the effects of destabilizing of occupational careers in globalizing economies on fertility are. Another question is to which extent women, who are also increasingly integrated in the labor market and are supposed to stay employed after childbirth, are affected by this trend. Current research shows a quite mixed picture in this regard.

CUTTING-EDGE RESEARCH

Recent studies have focused on several issues: Firstly, from a methodological point of view, they analyze the impact of economic uncertainty in general and labor market insecurity in particular on fertility as an integrated part of individual life courses. They use individual-level data and apply longitudinal multivariate methods of analysis. Secondly, from the substantive point of view, studies have mainly dealt with the impact of male and female unemployment or perceived job insecurity on family formation or—more generally—with effects of subjectively perceived economic uncertainty on transition rates to first birth. Thirdly, as women's labor market participation has expanded and the dual career pattern becomes more and more common, the effects of labor market insecurity on women and not only on men have gained more attention. Fourthly, studies have focused on certain geographical regions: Of particular interest were Central and Eastern Europe, where the transformation of the former communist countries caused not only major sociopolitical discontinuities but also an economic downturn, high unemployment rates, and a weakening of state support systems (Sobotka *et al.*, 2011). Another focus was put on Southern Europe where high levels of youth unemployment and the precarious paths of entry into an occupational career impact the transition to adulthood (Adserà, 2011). Finally, initial analyses

investigating the effects of the most recent economic crisis starting in 2008 in the United States and in Europe have been published (Sobotka *et al.*, 2011).

Comparing different countries, one gains a diverse picture of the impact of labor market insecurity on family formation (Adserà, 2011; Kreyenfeld *et al.*, 2012; Sobotka *et al.*, 2011). Contradictory results have been obtained regarding the effects of unemployment on men and women. While the evidence is still rather consistent for men, the effects of unemployment for women vary quite strongly. Obviously, they depend heavily on women's qualification level, the labor market structure, historical and cultural peculiarities, and the family and welfare policies in the various countries investigated (Kreyenfeld, 2010; Lundström & Andersson, 2012; Pailhé & Solaz, 2012; Schmitt, 2012). Low fertility rates and postponement of family formation in Southern Europe are at least partially caused by the poor job prospects and nonstandard employment contracts of young adults in these countries (Adserà, 2011; Vignoli, Drefahl, & De Santis, 2012).

Findings on the effects of the subjective perception of economic uncertainty on the timing and incidence of family formation also seem to be contradictory. The results depend on the respective measure applied. This unsatisfactory fact can be illustrated by a look at recent studies of the German case: Some of them hardly find any effects of perceived job insecurity (Kreyenfeld, 2010). Other studies present a negative effect of the perceived probability of unemployment on family formation of women (Bhaumik & Nugent, 2011; Hofmann & Hofmeyer, 2013).

One reason for the inconsistent findings of recent studies dealing with different countries or regions might be that individual perceptions of insecurity are different. An illustrative example gives a comparison between West and East Germany showing that individual values and life plans matter systematically for the degree to which economic uncertainty affects the timing of family formation (Bernardi, Klärner, & von der Lippe, 2008).

KEY ISSUES FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is evidence that labor market insecurity and unemployment risks as consequences of economic crisis or individual deprivation have an impact on family formation over the life course. However, it is hard to find a conclusive explanation and the mechanisms are not fully understood. Many theoretical and empirical questions are still not answered. Before we address some methodological challenges of the empirical analysis more precisely, we first reconsider some theoretical assumptions.

THEORETICAL ISSUES

Anthropological and historical research shows that in the history of mankind the timing and number of births has always been regulated according to the available resources for bringing up offspring in one or the other way. However, the question of what has been perceived as a sufficient level of resources needed for satisfactory household production has been answered very differently.

In today's modern or—as it is often phrased—post-modern societies family formation is no longer taken for granted as an obligatory step in the life course and it is increasingly a matter of conscious decision making. Sexuality has been disconnected from fertility and the availability of safe contraception empowered couples to plan the “whether” and “when” of childbirth. Couples can consider whether it is opportune to have a child at all and when to take responsibility for a child under the given circumstances of their life course. Many couples decide on family formation—and are expected to do so by their social environment—only after they are convinced that they can draw on sufficiently sound and stable economic conditions in the future to enable them to bring up their children properly and to continue pursuing their other life goals.

The male breadwinner model has lost relevance. However, it has become obligatory for spouses to remain in paid employment and to be economically independent of their partner. The relevance of the man's income has not deteriorated. Because couples with children often still adopt a traditional pattern of household production, the income of the male partner is considered to be particularly important and the timing of family formation corresponds to the economic prospects of the man as the main provider of the material basis for the family household. However, it is an open question how long this relative dominance of the male income will remain valid because as women attain better qualifications and have improved prospects in the labor market, the balance between the sexes changes in this regard also.

This development has several consequences. First, a further postponement of family formation can be expected because two employment careers have to be synchronized. Second, the costs of a family household increase, because daycare for children has to be paid for and the household production has to be organized in a more efficient way by purchasing more services rather than self-producing them. Third, two incomes mean that the burden on men to achieve a secure work and income situation might be lower because the female partner could step in. This would lower the effects of economic insecurity on family formation because the woman could take on the role of the main provider of income, at least for a while.

From these assumptions quite a number of factors emerge, which have to be looked at to understand whether and how economic hardship, labor market insecurity, and income risks impact decisions about family formation. These factors encompass a mixture of objective conditions of the labor market and the socioeconomic background of individuals, the couple's internal organization of the household production and division of domestic work, the individuals' subjective perceptions of life course risks, and their subjective demands in regard to the different issues of family life and life outside the family. If we want to obtain a complete picture of the impact of labor market insecurity on family formation, we have to consider all these objective and subjective factors and identify the mechanisms leading to different outcomes. Let us discuss a few examples.

A similar objective situation in regard to labor market insecurity might lead to different behavior depending on the subjective perception of risks. One has to assume that men and women show a different level of *risk aversion*. They stick more or less strongly to the conviction that gainful and stable employment of both partners, as the primary source of household income, is necessary to bear the costs of parenting and other activities.

Child-related aspirations might be differently high. They influence the extent to which economic insecurity is seen as a hazard for a satisfying family development. For example, high aspirations in regard to parenting and the standard of living of a family can lower their propensity to have a child because they assume that they cannot meet these requirements. For these couples, employment insecurity should be more relevant for family planning than in a case where economic uncertainty is not perceived as a relevant menace for satisfactory parenting. In addition to the precarious employment situation of young adults, this seems partly to explain the low fertility rates in Southern Europe because the aspirations in regard to the prerequisites of family formation in these familialistic countries are particularly high. Whether couples just postpone family formation in case of an economic crisis or give up their intention to have children depends on the expected duration of this kind of insecurity, the impression that things will not change for the better, and that the future in terms of economic welfare is uncertain (Ranjan, 1999).

Individuals' aspirations in regard to *extrafamilial activities*, their engagement in other life domains and their standard of living impact the readiness to invest in children and also depend on the expected economic security over the life course (Easterlin, 1976). If the goal of having a family is not that strong and a couple does not want to give up its extrafamilial engagement or reduce the demands from other life goals, the primary intention might be to preserve the ability to pursue these interest as far as possible before starting a family. An important question is of how strongly couples fear that their future occupational career is menaced by the formation of a family. This does not so

much concern the effects on potential family life but the question of whether, in an economically difficult situation, a family augments the restrictions on following personal interests in other life domains, particularly as far as their career and standard of living are concerned.

In these three examples, a favorable labor market should be supportive to family formation because it means lower risks of experiencing unemployment and economic hardship.

(4) We already mentioned that economic uncertainty over the life course could motivate family formation because a family could be a kind of tool to reduce future uncertainties in regard to deciding on the next steps in the life course (*uncertainty reduction*). Friedman, Hechter, and Kanazawa argue that this could particularly apply to women with low levels of qualification (Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa, 1994). Economic insecurity leads to compensatory action by these women: They have a child and their family becomes a fulfilling field of engagement and a source of certainty in regard to future decision making. In some cases, teenage motherhood can be explained by this phenomenon.

(5) The drop in fertility rates in Eastern European countries during the period of political and *economic transformation* was very pronounced. There are several possible reasons for this: The decline in fertility could be the result of (i) a process of assimilation to the Western pattern of family formation, (ii) a general perception of preliminary societal uncertainty regarding the future and an increasing reluctance in regard to family formation or (iii) a perceived increasing labor market insecurity owing to the changing structure of the economy.

If we want to understand the effects of labor market insecurity on family formation, we need to know much more about the issues mentioned in the previous examples. In particular, the subjective perceptions of economic development and risks by men and women are crucial.

METHODOLOGICAL ISSUES

The theoretical considerations illustrate main aspects of a methodological program. As the subjective factor is so important for disentangling the complex relationship between economic conditions, labor market insecurity, and uncertain future, we need more detailed research investigating the causal factors at the individual level. This means that we need long-term studies allowing life course and cohort analyses with subjective indicators. They have to cover a considerable time span because it can be expected that the age at the onset and the duration of periods of insecure employment play a major role. To analyze the impact of economic uncertainty requires to study the full range of determinants of fertility behavior and not only to consider single

life course events and objective living conditions. It is necessary to include measures of salience and intentions in regard to goal pursuit in different life domains. It also means to control for personal characteristics such as risk aversion. Retrospective data collection is of limited value in this case because the subjective information has to be recorded on time to avoid memory biases. Various household panels in the United States and in Europe as well as the “pairfam” study in Germany provide data that allow these kinds of analyses to a certain extent. However, as the review of current research has shown, more specialized studies that focus on the respective questions in more detail are needed.

Another lesson can be learned from the cutting-edge research. Not only are analyses with standardized data of value but qualitative research could also add to a better understanding of the underlying mechanisms leading to the (non)effects of labor market insecurity on family formation and other aspects of the individual life course.

Finally, a comparative perspective is also of great importance. This means conducting more comparisons than previously over time and cohorts and between regions or countries. Such studies could show whether individuals in the past dealt with uncertainties and insecurity differently in comparison with today. Such studies could also show how perceptions of and strategies for coping with insecurity differ between countries with different social and institutional structures.

SUMMARY/CONCLUDING COMMENTS

As the occupational lives of men and women are increasingly characterized by instabilities and insecurity, and as this particularly applies to the phase of transition to adulthood, the question of the impact of labor market insecurity on fertility is highly relevant. Only if this interrelation is well understood is it possible to find adequate measures and tools to reduce possible hazardous consequences for family formation. It seems obvious that those consequences are apparent, but do not occur under all circumstances. Evidence shows that the relationship between labor market insecurity and family formation is rather complex. Even cutting-edge research using sophisticated data and methods of analysis has so far not shed so much light on it that the mechanisms are well understood. One important reason may be that both the occupational career and the family career are embedded in an interdependent life course. Another reason is that the individuals’ subjective perceptions of insecurity and its expected consequences for the life course have not been looked at sufficiently detailed. It seems to be important that current studies based on data from large panel studies are supplemented by more specific

and detailed research in which quantitative and qualitative analyses are combined in a productive way.

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Johannes Huinink's interests lie in the fields of theoretical model building and empirical research in Sociology. Research fields are family dynamics,

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