

Global uncertainty, fertility intentions and realization in Norway

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The aim of this study is to explore the link between global uncertainty and fertility intentions and realization in Norway. We ask whether worries about global issues such as climate change, terrorism, economic uncertainty, and political extremism influence people's fertility intentions and realization independent of their actual situation. This is built on the insight that globalization, social media, and new digital technologies have brought the world closer together and individual life course decisions are nowadays not only embedded in a local, but also global context (Mills & Blossfeld, 2003). An increase in global economic and political uncertainty may cross borders and despite a stable national or local economy, individuals may perceive higher economic uncertainty (Comolli et al., 2020). In turn, this can affect fertility decisions.

Empirical studies show that fertility intentions are a reliable predictor of actual fertility behavior (Bachrach & Morgan, 2013), but frequently there exists a disconnection between these intentions and their realization. It is crucial to identify the factors that contribute to this gap to assist individuals in reaching their reproductive goals (Beaujouan & Berghammer, 2017; Vignoli & Régnier-Loilier, 2010). Uncertainty may hinder both the formation and realization of fertility intentions, and this study aims to explore how such uncertainty imposes these constraints.

Here we focus on men and women aged 20 to 38 years that have not started a family yet and examine whether worries about global conditions influence their intentions of having a first child and the realization of positive intentions. We use longitudinal data from the Norwegian Generations and Gender survey conducted in 2020 and 2024.

Theoretical considerations

To investigate the relationship between worries about global issues and people's fertility intentions and realization, we build on the Narrative framework (Vignoli et al., 2020). This framework expands the general theoretical argument, which states that higher levels of uncertainty induce people to avoid or postpone major life commitments. The narrative framework argues that also the perception of the future—and not only the current situation or uncertainties—influences the decision-making process regarding childbearing. If people expecting future societal economic decline, this could result in lower fertility intentions - even if

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they are currently in a safe employment situation and have a steady income. Results from a recent laboratory experiment in Norway using the Narrative framework demonstrate that perceived economic uncertainty about the future does affect people's fertility intentions (Lappegård et al., 2021). That is, people exposed to a scenario describing a future with stronger national economic constraints and as less security on the job market, have lower fertility intentions than others, exposed to a scenario describing a more secure future.

To capture people's perceptions about the future for this study, we use a measure where the respondents are asked to think about the future and then asked how worried they are about different global issues. We assume that young people's decisions to have children are increasingly influenced also by global issues. As today's world is much more connected than ever before, people are more likely to also take events and conditions in other countries than their own into account when making decisions. We assume that people who are worried about different global issues for the future have lower fertility intentions and are less likely to realize positive intentions than those that are not worried. Such avoidance assumption could also be supported by the prospect theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979), which argue that people's decision-making is not based on the choices giving maximum utility, but rather potential losses and gains relative to their individual reference points. Thus, worries caused by prospects of more uncertainty related to global issues could create lack of clarity and more doubts about what to expect and thereby negatively influence people's fertility decisions.

Next, we expect differences in the relationship between worries about global issues and fertility depending on the global issue people are asked to view. How worried people are about these issues may be related to how likely it is that they will be affected by the situation. Following the Construal level theory (CLT) proposed by Trope and Liberman (2010), how people are thinking about the future depends on different psychological dimensions of distance. People's reference point is the self in the here and now. When removing themselves from that point thinking about the future, they do this in time, space, social distance and hypotheticality. These form the different psychological dimensions of distance. We assume that the shorter the psychological distance, the stronger is the impact of a worry on fertility intentions and their subsequent realization are stronger. For instance, awareness about climate changes is increasing and different events are perceived as consequences of climate changes (e.g. floods, heavy rain, heatwaves), the level of abstraction becomes lower. This means that people may view climate changes not only as something that will occur in a distant future, but rather as something that is already happening and will affect their future.

Analytical framework

We use the Norwegian Generation and Gender Survey conducted in November 2020 and in April 2024. Our analysis is based on a sub-sample of childless men and women aged 20-38 years in the first wave in 2020. In addition to the GGS baseline questionnaire, a battery of questions about global uncertainty were added to the Norwegian questionnaire. The main question used here is: "looking at today's situation and thinking about the future, how much does the following worry you?" The different items following this question are related to terrorism, climate change, overpopulation/population pressure, economic crisis, increased number of refugees, high

unemployment, organized crime, military conflicts, global epidemics, weakened democracy, increased social inequality and political extremism. These items are grouped using factor analysis. Preliminary findings using a slightly different sample detected four factors. These are referred to as *Politics*, *Conflicts*, *Climate*, and *Economics*. *Politics* includes the items weakened democracy, increased social inequality and political extremism (see table). *Conflicts* include terrorism, organized crime, military conflicts, as well as global epidemics. *Climate* includes overpopulation, climate changes, and prospects of future generations. Last, *Economics* include economic crisis, high unemployment as well as increased number of refugees.

Table 1. Rotated factor loadings and factor alpha coefficient of issues to worry about

	Factor 1: Politics	Factor 2: Conflicts	Factor 3: Climate	Factor 4: Economics
Weakened democracy	0.86			
Increased social inequality	0.85			
Political extremism	0.77			
Terrorism		0.69		
Organized crime		0.68		
Military conflict		0.73		
Global epidemic		0.77		
Overpopulation			0.75	0.42
Climate change			0.81	
Prospects of future generations	0.30		0.49	
Economic crisis				0.42
High unemployment				0.47
Increased number of refugees				0.87
Alpha	0.78	0.73	0.66	0.62
Mean score	2.61	2.42	2.63	2.48

Note: blanks represent $abs(\text{loading}) < .3$

We will use linear probability regression models to investigate the link between global worries and the childbearing-decision making process in two steps. First, we estimate how worries about global issues affect the intention to have a first child in the next three years, based on data from the GGS-II Wave 1 (2020). Next, we model how among those with a positive intention, these worries affect their actual realization of intentions within the next three years (based on GGS-II Wave 2 form 2024). The explanation variable is global uncertainty where we use the factors from the factor analysis. We control for gender, age, educational attainment, activity status, and marital status.

Research contribution

This study contributes to the research field in several ways. It can give new insights into how people's worries about global conditions influence fertility intentions as well as realization of fertility intentions. It can give a better understanding of whether some worries are more important than others for people's fertility decisions. Ultimately, it provides valuable insights into the interplay between global concerns and individual fertility decision-making.

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