

Further reflections on the Theory of Planned Behaviour and fertility research

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The 'debate' occasioned by our comments on the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) and its application to fertility research has given rise to a rich and thoughtful set of reflections. We are grateful to all who responded to our commentary by raising important insights about the TPB and the value of alternative approaches to demographic research on fertility. These contributions have enriched our own thinking about the issues involved in modelling fertility and, we hope, will also stimulate further debate in the field at large.

Because many reactors seemed to assume otherwise, we want to reiterate that our commentary was not intended as a critique of the TPB but a challenge to the idea that the TPB was an optimal starting point for studying fertility. As we noted, many demographers have found it useful. Liefbroer and Klobas confirmed this in their comments, noting the useful extensions that can be made to the models to deal with concerns we raised. These include extensions addressing the complexity of fertility as a product of multiple behaviours, life course trajectories in beliefs, attitudes and intentions, feed-back mechanisms and the impact of macro-level factors. We agree that these extensions of the TPB greatly improve its value for fertility research.

A crucial factor in our reservations about the TPB as a starting point for theorising fertility is its assumption that the impact of beliefs and attitudes on behaviour must be mediated through the formation of conscious, deliberative intentions. Miller (2011) raises similar concerns. Liefbroer (2011) argues that the TPB would still be a useful heuristic framework if intentions were ignored. Rightly or wrongly, we view the central role given to intentions as a defining characteristic of the TPB, and this belief plays a crucial role in shaping our comments.

The issue is not whether automatic processes in the mind feed into observed behaviours, but whether they can do so directly. Ajzen and Fishbein 2000 thoughtfully discuss the compatibility of the TPB's models of attitude formation and change with dual process models of cognition that posit the existence of both automatic and deliberative processes. They fully embrace automaticity in the

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formation and retrieval of attitudes (as do we), but assert that complex social *behaviours* (including those that contribute to fertility) necessarily entail conscious deliberation and hence an intention to act in a certain way (Ajzen and Fishbein 2000; Ajzen 2011).

While agreeing that the behaviours leading to fertility, and often fertility itself, may often be consistent with (and perhaps directly resulting from) formulated intentions, we part company with Ajzen's view that a pathway of influence which leads *only* through behavioural intentions can adequately account for fertility, or even for the micro-behaviours that produce fertility outcomes. Our view concords with psychologists (e.g. Smith 1996; see also references cited in Miller 2011) who view automatic processes as playing a direct role in much of human behaviour.

This assertion rests, of course, on what exactly we mean when we talk about intentions, and there lies the rub. One issue is whether intentions necessarily belong to the realm of deliberative action. Although Ajzen (2011) is clear that intentions involve deliberative processes - a point that Klobas (2011) and others reinforce - Ajzen suggests (2011) that they may exist at a subconscious level. Yet, if intentions are assumed to exist outside of consciousness, they cease to involve deliberation; therefore, they are no longer reasoned, and the TPB becomes indistinguishable from most other models. We agree with Philipov (2011) that clarifying the concept of intention would be useful; such a step could enhance the TPB's utility for fertility research and also facilitate the analysis of its relative advantages over other theories.

A second issue relates to specifying the characteristics of intentions that predict behaviour in ways useful to fertility research. Demographers have generally conceptualised fertility intentions as plans to have or not to have a child (or a particular number of children), perhaps under particular circumstances or at particular times. Intentions of this type are assumed to exist among women of childbearing age, to be consciously accessible for self-report in surveys and to be stable enough over time to be useful for the prediction of behaviour. However, this view of intentions seems quite at odds with the view of intentions in the TPB. Here, the relevant intentions may be tied to situational cues and are highly proximate to action. The problem here is the same regardless of whether one is talking about an intention to have a child or an intention to use contraception. Barber (2011) suggests that if intentions must be measured at the point of action, it is "a bit like understanding that someone died because his heart stopped". If the mediation of cognitive influences on behaviours through intentions is to be useful for fertility research, intentions must be susceptible to prior measurement, which means they must be accessible to conscious reporting and formulated in advance of the event.

Finally, many of our responders noted that the TPB does, contrary to our assertion, allow for the integration of external factors that affect behavioural, normative and control beliefs. Klobas illustrates this in her contribution, also

suggesting that external factors can moderate the impact of intentions on behaviour. Although we agree that the TPB can accommodate the impact of individuals' exposures to external constraints and experience, it remains an individual-focused model. In the context of population research, we believe that the TCA offers a substantial advantage by more fully developing the mechanisms through which macro-level structures and micro-level cognition, resources and actions intersect. These mechanisms were not explored fully in our contribution to this volume but are addressed in our recent volume (Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011).

We, like many demographers, have devoted considerable attention to fertility intentions and what they mean for fertility. Paradoxically, it may be the central role that intentions play in the TPB that makes it appealing to demographers. And yet, this debate has underscored the disconnect between traditional demographic approaches to conceptualising and measuring intentions and the postulates of the TPB. Certainly, this disconnect can be narrowed and there is undoubtedly much fruitful research that can be done to capitalise on the insights that the TPB offers. Our assertion that demographers might want to consider alternative theories as a starting point for fertility research goes deeper, however. It questions the preeminence given to intentions in research that seeks to explain fertility as a function of individual psychology as well as environmental opportunities and constraints. Our contribution in this volume and a recent book (Johnson-Hanks et al. 2011) elaborate one such theory at an early stage of development; other, better, theories are sure to follow. If this debate has begun to identify issues for demographers to consider in their pursuit of an optimal theory, it will have accomplished much.

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