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Social Influences on Fertility

A Comparative Mixed Methods Study in Eastern and Western Germany

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This article uses a mixed methods design to investigate the effects of social influence on family formation in a sample of eastern and western German young adults at an early stage of their family formation. Theoretical propositions on the importance of informal interaction for fertility and family behavior are still rarely supported by systematic empirical evidence. Major problems are the correct identification of salient relationships and the comparability of social networks across population subgroups. This article addresses the two issues through a combination of qualitative and quantitative data collection and analysis. In-depth interviewing, network charts, and network grids are used to map individual personal relationships and their influence on family formation decisions. In addition, an analysis of friendship dyads is provided.

Keywords: *fertility; family formation; social networks; Germany; mixed methods; comparative case studies*

Comparative research designs based on the mixed methods approach are still a rare feature in population research, mainly because of two challenges they face. First, qualitative research often uses single case studies and rarely exhausts its comparative potential. The second challenge is the merging of quantitative and qualitative procedures, which typically is resource and time intensive. Yet the advantages of doing so are obvious. Comparing the similarities and differences of the factors and mechanisms involved in human behavior across groups is a powerful way to find out more about the cultural and social world around us. In the social sciences, comparative qualitative methods of data collection and analysis provide us with the opportunity to move beyond the mere understanding of the single case and to gain theoretical insights into the social process under examination.

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In this article, the social process is constituted by the social influence process that makes individual family formation interdependent within given social settings, namely, eastern and western Germany. The literature increasingly tends to include social interaction effects in demographic accounts of fertility change (Behrman, Kohler, & Watkins, 2002; Kohler, 2001; Kohler & Bühler, 2001). The recognition that individuals and couples are socialized actors embedded in a web of informal relationships with kin relatives and peers led researchers to include in their models social mechanisms such as social learning and social influence (Bernardi, 2002, 2003; Bongaarts & Watkins, 1996; de Bruijn, 1999). Yet the way in which the characteristics and the content of social interaction in informal social networks of kin and peers influence individual childbearing expectations, attitudes, preferences, and ultimately behavior is still not sufficiently understood.

The relationship between the individual's social environment and his or her decision making on childbearing can be studied from two fundamental perspectives: One can focus on changes in the social environment as a consequence of parental behavior or, alternatively, on the influence of social relationships and networks on childbearing choices. The first perspective looks at the effect of having children or not on the social environment of the given cohorts, such as changes in the composition of the social network as a consequence of first childbirth or according to the age of the youngest child. The second perspective concentrates on the opposite causal relationship, namely, the effects of the social environment on the individual or on the decision-making process of a couple with regard to childbearing. We are aware that this classification does not necessarily mirror the real processes, given that the actual causal relationship is likely to be a complex one implying recursive dynamics. Our research takes the second perspective nevertheless, as this distinction is a useful analytic tool.

Although there has been substantial effort to model the role that social interaction plays in the dynamics of fertility preferences, there is little empirical evidence about the social mechanisms at work or the variation in the composition of the networks of informal relationships in relation to fertility behavior. The major problems encountered in collecting appropriate empirical evidence to test the theoretical propositions and models are presented by the correct identification of informal relationships salient in fertility decision making and by the comparability of social networks across population subgroups. We regard a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches as best suited to tackle the two problems, given the different strengths that mixed methods have and given the nature of the social process in which we are interested. Let us clarify each of these aspects.

First, qualitative methods have the potential of reducing the first of the two problems. They are best suited not only to explore the meaning of parenthood but also to identify the relationships salient for contributing to the construction of this meaning and for their translation into intentions and behavior related to family formation. Second, quantitative methods are best suited to address the latter problem because they allow researchers to statistically compare networks and tie characteristics across subgroups of individual, dyadic, and ego-centered networks. Third, the integrated nature of mixed methods research designs is necessary when the social process under study implies a tight relation between social structure and social action, as with the social influence on family formation (Kelle, 2001).¹

The mixed methods approach has proven useful in a variety of empirical social research topics, such as the welfare of children and family (Burton, 2004), the labor market

behavior of ethnic minorities (Nee, Sanders, & Sernau, 1994), as well as education and nursing (Sandelowski, 2000), to name just a few. Yet researchers interested in population processes and phenomena have not taken advantage of the experience of neighbor disciplines. There are still very few empirical studies based on mixed methods approaches (Short, Chen, Entwisle, & Fengying, 2002, is a remarkable exception), and most of them deal with non-Western populations. To our knowledge, none of them address the issues of social network influences on family formation behavior.

We perform quantitative and qualitative analyses of the same cases. To this aim, we investigate a relatively moderate number of individual cases to get familiar with each individual case and to capture within-case variations in social influence patterns. At the same time, the number of cases is sufficient to conduct quantitative analyses and to explore variations of social network characteristics across cases. This choice allows us not only to triangulate results at the end of the study but also to provide what Creswell (2003) defined as the *complementary* understanding (p. 175) of social influence on family formation, an understanding that takes into account different aspects of the process. In the following, we show that a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches has a strong potential to reveal the interdependence between people's subjective perceptions and the structural conditions of their social context.

Fertility and Social Networks in the Former East and West Germany

This article investigates the mechanisms of social influence on family formation and compares them across two different urban contexts in Germany: the city of Rostock in eastern Germany (the former German Democratic Republic, or GDR) and the city of Lübeck in western Germany (the former democratic Federal Republic of Germany, or FRG). The decision to place the comparison within an eastern and western German context is based on the different patterns of family formation that the two regions have experienced and continue to do so, even to the point where they have been identified as having two different fertility regimes (Kreyenfeld, 2004). Women born in 1940 in East Germany gave birth to a first child on average at age 22, whereas their West German counterparts were older by 2.2 years. The difference increased to 4 years in the cohorts born in 1958. The FRG generation of 1958 had children later, if at all: The percentage of childlessness rose to 23% (compared to 12% in the generation of 1940), whereas in the GDR it dropped from 12% to 8% for the same generations (Kreyenfeld, 2001).

Social policies in the GDR were designed to favor women's labor force participation to enhance the image of the working mother, a positively valued image. They were geared to minimize job interruptions after childbirth by supplying inexpensive child care—a provision that was made use of by four out of five children aged between 0 and 3. The state guaranteed reentry into the labor market at the prejob absence level of qualification and offered special support to single mothers (Trappe, 1995). It is not surprising, then, that women's labor force participation in 1989 was 82% in the GDR—mostly full-time jobs—compared to 56% in the FRG (Hülser, 1996, p. 47). In the latter region, state support for parents was oriented toward an “employment-motherhood sequence,” with mothers who had small children

experiencing long interruptions and employed part-time. The consequences of the different family policies survived the postunification policy changes, possibly owing to the transmission of consolidated differences in values and perspectives from one generation to the next. At present, parity progressions to first birth are faster, and to second births they are slower by age in eastern Germany (Konietzka & Kreyenfeld, 2004). Also, for the cohorts who started their reproductive career after unification, childbearing is closely linked to formal marriage in western Germany only, while the rates of extramarital birth have risen to more than 50% in eastern Germany (Konietzka & Kreyenfeld, 2005). Moreover, being enrolled in education or being unemployed strongly lowers the risk of childbearing in western Germany but much less so in eastern Germany (Kreyenfeld, 2001).

The two parts of Germany have not only been characterized by two different family and fertility regimes in the past decades but also by specific forms of social interactions and social networks. Although there are only a few systematic comparative studies on this topic, they all describe fundamental differences in size, composition, and functions of social networks between the socialist GDR and the democratic FRG. Studies by Völker (1995), Völker and Flap (1995, 2001), and Schmelzer (2005) have found that GDR networks of friends, acquaintances, and families were typically small and their composition heterogeneous. There was a double rationale behind the network features: In small networks, it was easier to keep control over the trustworthiness of the interaction partners (denunciation was a widespread and serious issue in the GDR), and heterogeneous networks ensured maximal provision of goods to compensate for the scarce availability of these goods on the market. Also, the social networks of eastern Germans consisted of a higher share of kin compared to the share of friends (Uhlendorff, 2004). In the FRG, by contrast, the networks have always been weaker, larger, and more homogeneous. The strength of the weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) mainly consisted in being a source of information.

It is still not clear, however, whether these differences have persisted throughout the entire 15 years following unification or what potential changes have occurred. Völker and Flap (1995) found signs of network disintegration in eastern Germany, until 1995 indicated by a (further) reduction in size and density and the loss of function of many network members. Moreover, there are “no signs that the citizens of the former GDR made up for the loss of social capital by intensifying the relationships they were left with” (Völker & Flap, 1995, p. 105). However, Nauck and Schwenk (2001) found that network characteristics, such as the composition of the network or the frequency of contacts, changed considerably in both parts of Germany in the 1990 to 1996 time span, and they advised not to overstate the preunification differences. In addition, no study we know of clarifies the mechanisms by which network characteristics impact personal attitudes, decisions, and thus behavior.

Our study aims at documenting current intra-German differences in young adults' conceptions on parenthood and their desire to have children. By the same token, it intends to reveal the mechanisms behind social influence in social networks that affect the family formation decision making of individuals. Finally, we want to understand how the mere structure of social interaction (in our case, the individuals' social networks) determines the effect of social influence mechanisms. All of these aspects require consideration as they may exert interrelated effects. For instance, even if social interactions were only marginally different in the eastern and western part of Germany, the content of what is interacted upon and the structure of the network might still produce relevant differences.

The article is structured as follows: First, we present the methodological concept and research design of the study. Next, we explore the range of attitudes, expectations, and preferences related as to childbearing and parenthood issuing from the multiple voices of Ego and their network partners. We also compare the similarities and differences in the frames emerging from our eastern and western German interviews. In the following section, we move away from individual accounts by interacting Ego's perceptions with the perceptions of their network partners. This approach overcomes one of the main limitations of ego-centered network data currently collected in demographic research: the limitation that Ego is the only source of information. Here, we focus on the mutual perspectives of the dyads of close friends on each other's desires and attitudes toward family formation.

Finally, we present a quantitative comparison of social network characteristics across specific subpopulations. The results of the article invite further reflection on the perspectives of respondents within these groups and help to contextualize their stories as well as to reread them under a new light, breaking with the artificial distinction between qualitative and quantitative approaches or data. The aim of our comparative analysis reflects the logic of comparing cases (Ragin, 1996): We are not so much interested in finding the one explanation (or model) that fits both contexts but rather in determining what the variations in the social interaction structures lead to and how they are linked to the effect of single relationships and their influence on behavior.

Research Design

For the purpose of our study, we selected two German cities situated in the north of the country at the shore of the Baltic Sea: Rostock and Lübeck. They are highly comparable with respect to several features. With Rostock (eastern Germany) and Lübeck (western Germany) sharing a common history as members of the medieval Hanseatic League and being an integral part of the Protestant north of Germany, the two cities can almost be considered as "Hanseatic twins" because of the comparable size of their resident population (around 200,000 inhabitants), their relatively high unemployment rate (13.8% in Lübeck as compared to 7.6% in western Germany, and 18.2% in Rostock as compared to 17.7% in eastern Germany in the year 2002) and because they shared the same religious, historic, and economic background until the postwar period at least.

The empirical data stem from a purposive (or quota) sampling of individuals, which we will refer to in the following as the primary sample, or *Ego-sample* (with all Egos being the individuals selected through the quota sampling procedure). To this first sample, we then added a subsample composed of three relevant members of Ego's social network: one of Ego's parents, the current partner, and a close friend, when these are available. From now on, we refer to this subsample as the secondary sample, or *Alters' sample* (all Alters are members of Ego's social network).

The criteria defining the quota for the Ego-sample are the *city* (Rostock or Lübeck) where the individual spent his or her secondary school years and the *type of school* attended. For the latter, sampling for *gymnasium* graduates (equivalent to the American high school or the British grammar school) and for *realschule* graduates (an intermediate secondary school) is a way of targeting the educational groups in Germany whose fertility

Table 1
Sampling Goal

Type of School	Respondent	Number of interviews		
		Lübeck	Rostock	Total
<i>Gymnasium</i>	Ego	16	16	32
	Alter	48	48	96
<i>Realschule</i>	Ego	16	16	32
	Alter	48	48	96
		128	128	256

behavior has changed considerably in recent years (Kreyenfeld, 2001). Egos graduated from school between 1991 and 1994 and were thus aged between 27 and 31 at the time of interview. We choose this cohort because family formation is likely to be a salient issue for individuals of this age group and because the social network of these individuals may have experienced parenthood (see Table 1 for a summary overview of the sampling goal).

Each individual, either in the primary or the secondary sample, is asked to be available for an intensive interview² with one of the researchers working on the project.³ The interview consists of three parts:

1. *A semistructured interview:* The problem-centered semistructured part of the interview (Witzel, 1985, 2000) focuses on prospective questions concerning first and second births. We cover retrospective experiences with childbearing in case some of the respondents are parents already. This part of the interview provides us with rich information on biographic events after graduation, ranging from school; the partnership history; the current partner; orientations, meanings, and expectations concerning childbearing; interaction with the partner on the topic; the characteristics of informal social relations; and interaction related to family formation, life course goals, and expectations. The qualitative component of our study relies partially on the systematic analysis of this part of the interview through theoretical and thematic coding (Flick, 1995, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).
2. *A network chart and network grid:* To assess and evaluate the influence of social networks on fertility choices, we use an adapted version of the hierarchical mapping procedure employed successfully in social psychology (Antonucci, 1986; Straus, 2002). The original technique consists of asking respondents to use a diagram of graded concentric circles, with the smallest circle in the center containing a word representing Ego. Each of the circles represents different levels of the perceived relevance of the network partner, and we rated them numerically from the outside of the chart, labeled 1 (*of little importance*), to the inside of the chart, labeled 6 (*highly important*). The respondents are free to define "a relevant relationship." This can be related to Ego's degree of identification with Alter, the emotional closeness between the two, the helpfulness of Alter in specific matters, or even any negative impact of Alter on Ego's life. We use the open stimulus as a first step to explore the variety of the different dimensions of relevance and to assess the kind of relationships that is relevant for fertility decision making. While the respondents fill in the chart, we ask them to explain in their own words the choices they make, for instance, the reason behind including a specific person and the meaning of placing that person in a given circle. We solicit information on relationships that entail material and emotional exchanges in case they are not

mentioned spontaneously. The aim is to identify the social networks defined along the two dimensions of emotional closeness and social support because previous studies show significant effects of emotional and material support on fertility intentions and behavior (Belsky & Rovine, 1984; Hammer, Gutwirth, & Phillips, 1982; Kohler & Bühler, 2001). The 10 most highly rated persons from the chart are entered into a classic grid. The respondents are asked to indicate the extent to which each of the persons mentioned is acquainted or befriended with any other in the grid, ranked on a 5-grade scale ranging from 0 (*not at all*) to 4 (*very closely*). The network chart is a central tool in the interview. We use it as a mixed data collection tool in itself as it is conceived to gain in-depth information to be analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively. On one hand, it provides rich descriptions of the ongoing social influence within the network; on the other hand, it records the structural characteristics of the ego-centered networks (density, size, closeness, and tie strength). We deliberately chose to collect data from the same cases in the qualitative and quantitative part of the study. The main reason for this is a theoretical one: Working with separate samples in the study of social influence on family formation would artificially create an analytical barrier between two processes that are tightly linked to each other. To have valid data on the social interaction embedded in the social network structure, we need to collect complete and complex information, including subjective meanings and norms, narratives on interaction, and information on the structure of the network.

3. *A sociodemographic questionnaire:* This is a relatively straightforward questionnaire summarizing the respondent's sociodemographic characteristics and some characteristics of up to eight of their important network partners.

Conceptions of Parenthood and Desires to Start a Family in Eastern and Western Germany

In this section, we compare the conceptions of parenthood with the desires to have children and establish a family as they emerge from our interviews with eastern and western Germans. Our initial assumption is that these frames differ due to east–west variations in the models of family formation followed by the family of origin. The different family and fertility regimes that the parental and grandparental generations of our respondents experienced are likely to have affected their considerations of what is the “normal” and “normative” way of forming a family. These conceptions are likely to have been handed down to the younger generation. The analysis tackles one of the primary effects of social interaction of interest to us, namely, the social construction of meanings about family and fertility.

In what follows, we present the results from our study of a subsample, namely, the dyads of close friends. The “peers category” of the network interviews contains a large number of different relationship types (partners, schoolmates, close friends), but for the purpose of our analysis we focus on just one type of relationship and present the results of 11 Ego–close friend dyads from each town. There are strong theoretical reasons to focus on close friends. From other research areas, we know that social learning and normative influence are sensitive to the strength of ties (Völker & Flap, 1995, pp. 91-92.). On one hand, the trust developed in a relationship tested and positively evaluated enhances social learning and the emergence of identification mechanisms. On the other, people linked by affective ties, such as close friends, often are likely to have a normative influence on each other. For these

reasons, friendship dyads are an appropriate starting point when exploring the mechanisms of social influence on fertility choices. Other sensible choices are the analysis of partner dyads and parent-children dyads. Not every Ego had a partner at the time of interview or has granted access to interview with her or his parents. Nevertheless, we still were able to interview close friends in each case. Thus, friendship dyads provide us with the opportunity to carry out a comparative analytical approach using a sufficient number of cases.

The 22 friendship dyads (ages 25 to 39)⁴ consist of 12 all-women, 5 all-men, and 5 mixed-sex dyads. All in all, 11 of them are all-childless-people dyads, 2 all-parents dyads, and 9 mixed dyads, where one person is a parent and the other is childless. Among other things, the interpretation of the narrative part of the interviews provides insight into the respondents' attitudes, expectations, and desires concerning family formation and parenthood. (The appendix contains an example of a focused summary of a dyadic relation.) The methodological challenge, then, consists in finding a systematic way of comparing a relatively large number of qualitative interviews within a three-member team. We adopted the *thematic coding* (Flick, 1995, 2002) and *constant comparative* methods (Boeije, 2002; Glaser, 1965). The two analytical approaches see case comparison as the principal process leading to theoretical knowledge. The initial assumption is that different groups of individuals hold different views on and have a different understanding of processes, events, or social situations, including those related to family and fertility. It is then of primary importance how to define the groups. We build the initial groups of comparison according to the criteria we used for the case and quota sampling, namely, city, gender, and educational background. For the purpose of this article, we limit the analysis to Egos with a high educational level in order not to weaken the comparison by including too many grouping criteria.

Methodologically, the transcribed interview text is divided into extracts of straightforward content interpretation; these ultimately constitute the *thematic structure* (TS) of the interview. An example of building a TS from an interview transcript is as follows: (a) coding all passages in which the respondents talk about a certain issue (for instance, coding positive expectations on working part-time following childbirth as "prefers working part-time"), (b) reorganizing the text extracts on a conceptual level into meaningful categories (for instance, the code "prefers working part-time" is listed under the category "compatibility of family and work"), and (c) comparing the emerging main categories emerging from the interviews in the same subgroup to derive a common TS for the group.⁵ Table 2 shows our findings for male and female high school graduates from Rostock and Lübeck.

Each of the cells in the table presents the TSs in terms of an array of category headers. We find two main categories comprising the personal narratives on family formation and parenthood of men and women in Rostock (eastern Germany) and five categories for women and four for men in Lübeck (western Germany). We now describe them to some detail.

Reporting on, thinking about, or imagining having a family appears to be a *comparatively* simple, natural, and straightforward business for young people in Rostock. They mostly do not make "a big deal" out of it; having children is taken for granted, and they do not dwell on considerations concerning preconditions, conflicts, consequences, or irreconcilabilities that may be or may have been involved when starting a family. "It was always clear to me that I will have children one day" or "I generally don't like too much planning about having children" are statements often heard during the interviews with the eastern German subsample.

Table 2
Comparison of the Thematic Structures by City and Gender Subsamples

Issue	Men	Women
Rostock (East)		
Desire to have children	Expectation to have children, but conditional upon partner's desire to have children and family	Expectation and unconditional desire to have children
Considerations on family planning	Some considerations of planning are important	Considerations of planning are not as relevant and considered as tiresome
Partnership considerations	A "good" partnership is important, independent of parenthood	A "good" partnership is important, independent of parenthood
Career considerations	General expression of flexibility in career orientations. To have a job is more important than the type of job	General expression of flexibility in career orientations. Having any job is part of life, relatively unrelated to family formation.
Lübeck (West)		
Desire to have children	General expectation to have children	General expectation to have children
Considerations on family planning	Strong considerations of family planning and responsibility ("male breadwinner model")	Strong considerations of family planning and responsibility ("male breadwinner model")
Partnership considerations	Not applicable	Centrality of the "right partner" for family formation. Financial stability is expected to be provided by the partner ("male breadwinner model")
Career considerations	Strong sequencing norm: first education, then job (provision of financial stability), then first child; strong income/ career orientation	Strong sequencing norm: first education, then first child. General preference for part-time work, little career ambitions

This is particularly, but not exclusively, true for women in Rostock. Their desires for children and expectations of having a family (once) are unquestioned, and the interindividual differences only pertain to—relatively mild—differences in the degree of urgency, constancy, or latency of the desire. Some women have an urgency to start a family soon, whereas others have a more relaxed time frame. Some women think about it constantly, whereas for others this is an issue that emerges only from time to time. Some women report that they are strongly aware of their desire to have children, whereas for others it appears to be a latent feeling in the back of their minds. Compared to their *general orientation* toward having children sooner or later in life, the individual considerations clearly seem to be a secondary concern. Some women complain about difficulties arising from partnership instabilities, from the strong mobility demands of their job careers, or from the perceived age pressure on women ("the biological clock"). However, these experiences

are never in the foreground of the desire-for-children stories of the young women from Rostock; that is, their priority is to have children, and they would subordinate all other “practical” aspects of family formation to this general orientation.

This is different for men in Rostock. Children are also a natural part of their (projected) lives, but their personal desire to have children appears more contingent on biographic developments, primarily having a satisfactory partnership with a woman who desires to have children. They also stress more often than do their female counterparts that two personal preconditions of family formation are crucial to them: personal maturity and a financial background sufficient to support a family. These considerations are as relevant as the personal desire to have children; that is, they would be willing—more than women—to forgo parenthood if practical issues speak against it.

Also, the interviews with men and women from Lübeck reveal a kind of “matter-of-course” attitude concerning having children and starting a family. We call this the “self-evidence” or “naturalness” of family formation. Naturally, the degree of this desire varies from individual to individual in that it can be more or less strong, urgent, or explicit—and it depends on the situation the respondent is in at the moment of interview. This is similar to the way in which young adults from Rostock talk about their desire. However, it is precisely the different life situation of the respondents that has a stronger weight in Lübeck than in Rostock. In Lübeck, it is mostly (a) difficulties experienced in life planning and in the realization of a desired life sequence and (b) missing economic or emotional preconditions for family formation that interfere with the realization of having a family and that lead to postponement. There are two aspects that stand out in particular and almost exclusively: (a) a positive attitude and an aspiration toward the “successful male breadwinner” model, paralleled by a similarly positive evaluation of the housewife model or of the part-time working model for women; and (b) a strong preference for the strict sequencing of events, which necessitates completion of education and (for males) starting work before thinking of having a child.

The views of men and women in western Germany complement each other in that they share the same gender and family model. Narrations of male respondents include statements about the need to take the responsibility of looking after a family and about wanting to finish studies and establish themselves in their job career *before* having children to provide financial stability to their families. This would then provide their partner with the option to cease work and to stay at home to look after the child for several years. These attitudes are strongly connected with the idea that the mother is the best person to care for a small child (“the child needs her mother”). In a mirror image, similar concepts are revealed in the statements made by the women in our western city. They prefer to stay at home to look after the child for 3 years and then to engage in part-time working activities. Against this background, enrolling the child into early child care institutions before he or she reaches age 3 or in a full-day kindergarten is hardly an issue. Early childhood enlistment into child care institutions carries the negative connotation of *abgeben*, a term often heard in Germany. It implies “getting rid of the child” heartlessly, even if only temporarily. The relevance of finding an economically successful partner who provides the financial basis for the family thus is a feature clearly evident in the narrations of our women in Lübeck.

The similarities and differences in the vocabulary of expectations, attitudes, and desires of young people in Lübeck and Rostock serve as important background information when

it comes to examining the effects of social interaction among friends that occur in people's social networks.

Social Interactions on Family Formation in Friendship Dyads

We now focus on the question of social interaction related to fertility and family behavior and taking place in friendship dyads. Below we present our findings of the selected friendship dyads (22 of them) that we analyzed in detail. The aim of this analysis is to understand the way in which interactions on fertility-related topics take place among friends and the way in which they may affect conceptions, plans, and behavior concerning family formation and parenthood. We proceed in three steps. First, we compose qualitative *descriptions on the social interactions* concerning family formation and parenthood and compile a summary of their effects on each of the individual dyads. Second, based on these descriptions we build a *typology of dyad interactions* regarding family formation. Third, we derive an *explanation for the observed distribution* of the types of social interaction from specific features of the friendship dyads.

For the first step, we produce a focused content interpretation to bring out the characteristics of the interaction on family formation and parenthood between friends. Obviously, it is not only family formation and parenthood that is an issue of observation and conversation between friends. Moreover, we find large variations in the kind of interaction on these issues. In the following section, we present the results of our comparative interpretative analysis, the latter of which differentiates six interaction types.

The Typology of Social Interaction in Friendship Dyads

We observe four different types of *symmetric interaction* on family formation in the 22 friendship dyads; that is, each friend has an influence on the other friend as far as family formation and parenthood is concerned—and vice versa. There are two types of *asymmetric interaction* in which only one of the friends exerts an influence and the other one is affected by it. We now provide brief descriptions of these types, including their names.⁶

Types of Symmetric Interaction (SI) in Friendship Dyads

SI-1: Alliance in desiring. In Rostock as well as in Lübeck, we find one dyad of single female friends (dyad numbers RD1 and LD6) who regard each other as allies in their longing for children and their desire to start a family. They report that they very often exchange their views on and feelings about these issues, and they support each other in maintaining these desires and longings also in times of unfavorable circumstances (such as no partner and an excessive job workload). The Ego of Dyad RD1, for instance, said, "We constantly talk about it: if we ever manage to have children." The Ego of Dyad LD6 stated, "Especially with her I talk about family formation, she also wants to have children and she has the same problem I have, and she also doesn't know how to realize it."

SI-2: Forerunner and successor. In Rostock we observe one dyad of female friends (dyad number RD8) who both have had long-standing partners throughout their study

years. They have always agreed on their desire to start a family. Whereas Ego then had a child relatively early and received substantial support from Alter in raising that child, Alter has now followed her example and even asked Ego to become the godmother of her child. Both friends report a “forerunner and successor effect”: Ego stated, “We had started having children and now our friends have to catch up with us.” Alter said, “They were the first of my friends to have children. And although it was not always easy, their child developed so nicely. And yes, I like their family a lot.”

SI-3: Sharing the joy of being childless. In contrast to the “allies in desiring,” we find one dyad of childless female friends in Rostock (RD10) whose interaction on family matters do not play a role. They are quite happy with being single (or they have just recently entered a partnership or maintain a “loose” partnership) and agree on enjoying the advantages of singlehood. Ego, for instance, said,

I really would like to wait a bit longer until I start a family. . . . This is also what I like about [Alter]. She is very inspiring to me, she’s independent and spontaneous. Yeah, for example, we like to travel together and that is all very great.

SI-4: Ignoring and postponement of the issue. In both Lübeck and Rostock, we observe three male friend dyads in which both friends “agree” (explicitly or implicitly) in ignoring and postponing starting a family. This agreement is mostly achieved by mere observation of the other one’s behavior—and by omitting the issue in conversations. In Dyads LD1 and LD2, all friends say that family formation will only become an issue after they have graduated from university or after they have finished their doctoral theses or settled in a stable job. Their conversations center mainly on work and leisure-time activities. In RD6, both friends provide mutual support especially as to their careers and leisure-time orientation, and the family issue is omitted altogether in their conversations.

Types of Asymmetric Interaction (AI) in Friendship Dyads

AI-1: One-sided observation of family life. Twelve dyads, 6 from Rostock and 6 from Lübeck, belong to this group. Here, the influence of one person on the other is one-directional; we did not find any signs of mutual influence. For instance, from observing Ego’s (f) family-formation in Dyad RD4, Alter (m) has gained insights into the issues of work-family compatibility: “And I was so surprised when she told me. And now I see how well it all works with her work and the child. This is really great.” Ego (f) from RD11 wondered about the applicability today of her former attitudes (of childbearing postponement) by observing the process of Alter’s (m) family formation, “In the past, he also wouldn’t have done this [having a child] so quickly. But, I mean, maybe I just don’t know, maybe it all works that fast that once you meet the right partner.” Alter (f) in Dyad LD9 was taken in by Ego’s child: “He is really cute, I like cool kids and he is a cool kid. . . . His mother serves as a model to me, how she copes with having a child, I really like how she does it.” Ego (f) from Dyad LD8 understood from observing Alter (f) that it is not a terrible affair to raise a child as a lone mother in case of partnership instability: “She brings up the child alone, her ex-partner doesn’t look after the child at all. But she copes with it very well, this is really cool, how she lives with her child.” Ego concluded for herself, “I certainly

want to have children one day and if I don't find the right partner, I will do it [bring up a child] alone, but I cannot imagine living without a child." In Dyad LD5, Ego (f), who has known Alter (f) for many years, was strongly impressed by observing Alter's life in her family of origin. Ego has learned from this observation that she wants to have a child before she is in her late 30s or early 40s. She said,

I am a little put off by this friend whose mother had her late. She always suffered from this. She didn't have a real mother. When she was 20, her mother was more like a grandmother. I wouldn't want it that way, I wouldn't want to do that to my child. It wouldn't be a real mother-daughter relationship then, which would mean for me to have close and friendly contact with your child.

Alter (m) in dyad RD5 clearly reported that his observations of Ego's (m) family formation has a postponing effect: "I mean, he already has two children, and he is of course quite fixed and stuck with his family. Looking at him I sometimes really think: 'It's great that I am still waiting a bit with all this.'"

AI-2: Assumption of an ally. An interesting effect can be observed in Dyad RD9. Ego (f) described Alter (m) as one of her friends who postpones family formation most strongly. She agrees with him that waiting to start a family and testing a partnership are important before it comes to family formation. She said, "And he has the same opinion as I. He would never ever move in quickly with a partner or have children." Surprisingly, however, Alter did not mention Ego at all in his circle of friends and has already made family plans with his current girlfriend. He wants them to live together and have a child with her within 1 or 2 years.

To complete our presentation of these interaction effects, we also observed three dyads in which there is no observable interaction concerning family formation and parenthood: the dyads numbered RD3, LD4, and LD7. For Dyad LD7, for instance, this might be due to the fact that the friendship ties are weak between Ego and Alter, so they do not consider each other as relevant enough to refer to each other to substantiate their own views or to have an influence on each other's opinions and decisions.⁷ In Dyad LD4, there are some signs that they are "allies in longing," but the information provided is not clear enough. In Dyad RD3, current irritations with the friendship prevent reports on interactions.

What do these types (or mechanisms) of social interaction depend on? We expect that they are not randomly distributed over friendship dyads; instead, we assume that they depend on other factors, such as the quality and duration of the friendship, experiences with the family of origin, or Ego's and Alter's more recent experiences with regard to partnerships and family behavior. This is a question of the structural correlates—maybe even determinants—of social interaction.

The Structural Correlates of the Mechanisms of Social Influence

Looking at the way in which the effects of the social interaction mechanisms affect the emergence, shaping, and realization of individuals' conceptions on family formation and parenthood, we can distinguish between three different patterns of influence. First, individuals (e.g., Egos) may perceive their observations, conversations, and other forms of

Table 3
Interaction Effects on Family Formation in Friendship Dyads

Effect on Ego	Effect on Alter		
	Acceleration	Neutral	Deceleration
Acceleration	RD1, RD8, LD6 “Alliance in desiring” “Forerunner and successor”	RD2, RD11, LD3, LD5, LD8 “One-sided observation”	
Neutral	RD4, RD7, LD9, LD10, LD11 “One-sided observation”	RD3, LD4, LD7	RD5 “One-sided observation”
Deceleration		RD9 “Assumption of an ally”	RD6, RD10, LD1, LD2 “Sharing the joy of being childless” “Ignoring and postponement of the issue”

Note: RD = ID for friendship dyads in Rostock; LD = ID for friendship dyads in Lübeck.

interaction with their friends as encouraging—or speeding up—their family formation plans; that is, they experience an *accelerating effect* on their own intentions for parenthood. Second, the effect is the opposite, a *decelerating effect* that discourages Ego from starting a family and that supports his or her attitude to postpone family formation. Third, some interactions do not have any perceivable effect—and therefore we classify them as *neutral*. These influences may be *symmetric*, that is, both friends encourage or discourage each other from having a child; or *asymmetric*, in that we find that the influence of one friend is not mutual. For an overview on the distribution of these effects, Table 3 displays the dyads and types of interaction presented above with respect to the effects they have on Ego and Alter, respectively.

Through a systematic content analysis of single cases (dyads), we identify other individual characteristics that appear to be related to the mechanisms of social influence, such as the respective family status of the friends in the dyad.⁸ Apparently, symmetric effects of social interaction occur (almost) exclusively in dyads in which both friends have a similar family status (dyad numbers RD1, RD6, RD8, RD10, LD1, LD2, and LD6). They interact in such a way that both of them mutually agree on either striving to have a family or postponing thinking about this issue. We find four such dyads in Rostock and three in Lübeck. Asymmetric interaction effects seem to be typical when the family status of friends differs (RD2, RD4, RD5, RD7, RD11, LD2, LD3, LD5, LD8, LD9, LD10, and LD11). Whereas one friend observes the other and draws conclusions from this for his or her own family life, the other stays unaffected. Interestingly, this effect works in one direction only: childless and/or single friends “learn” from their friends who have already established a family, whereas the latter do not refer to the former at all concerning family issues. We derive the following hypotheses from these observations:

Hypothesis 1: When the family status of two friends is similar, symmetric effects of social interaction prevail in terms of alliances between friends regarding family formation and conceptions on parenthood. These interaction patterns may be alliances of desiring, realization, or postponement.

Hypothesis 2: When the family status is different, the effect of social interaction on family formation and conceptions on parenthood is mostly asymmetric. Childless friends observe how their friends with children perform and from this draw positive or negative conclusions for their own intentions.

We find some exceptions nevertheless. Social interaction has an asymmetric effect in dyad RD9 despite the fact that both friends have a relatively similar family status (see the description above under “assumption of an ally”). In Dyad LD5, the effect of one-sided observation is not exerted by the person without a long-standing partnership on the person with such a partnership, but it works the other way around. The exceptions, however, can be explained by the asymmetries in the reciprocal appreciation of the friendship: In all cases, there are large differences in the friendship status that is mutually perceived, and only the person in the dyad with a higher value of the other person is influenced by his or her friend. In Dyad RD9, for instance, Ego and Alter differ largely in their evaluation of each other’s friendship. Whereas Ego rates Alter as an “importance 5 friend,”⁹ Alter does not mention Ego at all in his circle of friends. Here, it is only Ego who is influenced by Alter, but she herself does not have an effect on her friend. In Dyad LD5, where we find asymmetrical “speeding” effects of social interaction exerted from the childless and single friend (Alter) on the one with a steady partner and current family-formation plans (Ego), we observe the same mediating factor. Ego, who considers Alter as an “importance 6 friend,” learns from observing Alter (who considers Ego only as “importance 3 friend”). Following these considerations, we formulate an additional hypothesis:

Hypothesis 3: With a strongly imbalanced friendship, the predictions of Hypotheses 1 and 2 are superimposed by a friendship effect. Here, Hypotheses 1 and 2 require modification, and interactions occur following the friendship gradient.

In sum, the three hypotheses confirm our initial conjecture that social interaction between peers is of central relevance to fertility decisions. Furthermore, they reveal that “friendship” is an important moderator variable in this context. Taking into account the general prochild attitude that exists in Germany, it seems that friendship in particular is a crucial carrier of positive attitudes toward starting a family. To formulate it pointedly and to reformulate Hypothesis 2 (i.e., by a *modus tollens*), not sharing the positive feelings of a close friend who has become a parent is very likely to at least increase the imbalance between the two friends or to lead to estrangement or dissociation. These mechanisms support the hypothesis that peer networks have a *contagious* effect on the spread of the transition to parenthood (Bernardi, 2003). Given the limited scope of this article, we do not deal with the effects that other individual and network characteristics—such as Ego’s gender and the gender composition of his or her network—may have on the dyadic relationship and the social influence on parenthood the interaction conveys.¹⁰

Variations in the Characteristics of Numerical Personal Networks

So far, we have looked at the interaction of actors and at the proximate contextual aspects of social interactions. However, a mere focus on the immediate context of single interaction can sometimes hinder paying the attention required to the larger contextual conditions, that is, those that work in the background. Including both elements in the analysis involves considering the individual as well as the social context he or she acts in. To this end, we need to ask questions such as, What difference do general social conditions make to the actors interacting and to the interaction itself? In which way do interactions help to account for the more general social process?

Collecting data on both aspects and combining a more general description with specific interactions, strategies, and consequences is the aim of our mixed methods analysis. We therefore read the subjective perceptions collected in the semistructured part in the light of the configuration of the respondents' social networks. These configurations emerge through the construction of network indices, such as the *network size* (the number of persons belonging to the network), the *network density* (the number of ties between network members divided by the number of potentially possible ties), the average *network closeness* (the average distance to the innermost circle in the chart), and the average *network strength* (the average ratings of Alter relationships in the network grid).

In the following, we illustrate the way in which an analysis of this standardized information significantly contributes to answering our research question as well as to the comparability of our research. Using the information contained in the grid and chart, we can compare the distributions of network characteristics and point out some interesting differences. We compare *structural network characteristics* (density, size, closeness, and strength) across the major subgroups of the respondents, namely, the mean values of the network measures across some subgroups, defined by the city of the respondent's school location, the respondent's gender, and his or her parental status. The basis for the comparisons is provided by 53 interviews with the younger generation (excluding those with Alters who are Egos' parents). Of these, 36 are part of the original high school sample (Egos) and 17 are their network partners (Alters) of the same generation. Table 4 shows a summary of the median values and the results of a statistical test of the null hypothesis (median equality).¹¹

Although these numerical indices are only moderately reliable and valid when applied to the individual case, differences in their distributions between groups can be tested. We are aware that with nonrandom sample data such as ours, statistical significance generally does not indicate predictive power over the population. However, significance tests are commonly employed in these cases to gain a rough sense of the strength of the observed differences in the specific sample (Futing Liao, Balding, Bloomfield, & Cressie, 2002, p. 10). Here, we used a nonparametric test for independent samples when the group variance was different (Wilcoxon's test). The results of the tests of Table 4 are clearer when we look at Figure 1. Given the small n of the samples (generally 20 to 30 individuals in each case), a box plot representation is the most accurate description tool to compare the distribution of the variable. Figure 1 portrays the box plots of network sizes and densities (columns a and b) and of network closeness and strength measures (columns c and d) across

Table 4
Summary Network Measures by Subgroups (City, Gender, and Parental Status)

Network Measure	City			Gender			Parental Status		
	Median			Median			Median		
	Rostock	Lübeck	Difference	Male	Female	Difference	Parent	Childless	Difference
Network size	14	22	***	21	16	n.s.	22	17	n.s.
Network density	0.57	0.71	n.s.	0.73	0.85	n.s.	0.76	0.58	**
Network closeness	54.3	72.5	**	67	59.5	n.s.	64.5	64.7	n.s.
Network strength	0.33	0.39	n.s.	0.37	0.3	n.s.	0.45	0.3	*
	<i>n</i> = 24	<i>n</i> = 30	<i>N</i> = 54	<i>n</i> = 23	<i>n</i> = 31	<i>N</i> = 54	<i>n</i> = 18	<i>n</i> = 36	<i>N</i> = 54

* $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$ (Welch's t test for mean values, Wilcoxon's test for medians).

the subgroups. The first row displays the results of comparison between the respondents in Rostock and Lübeck.

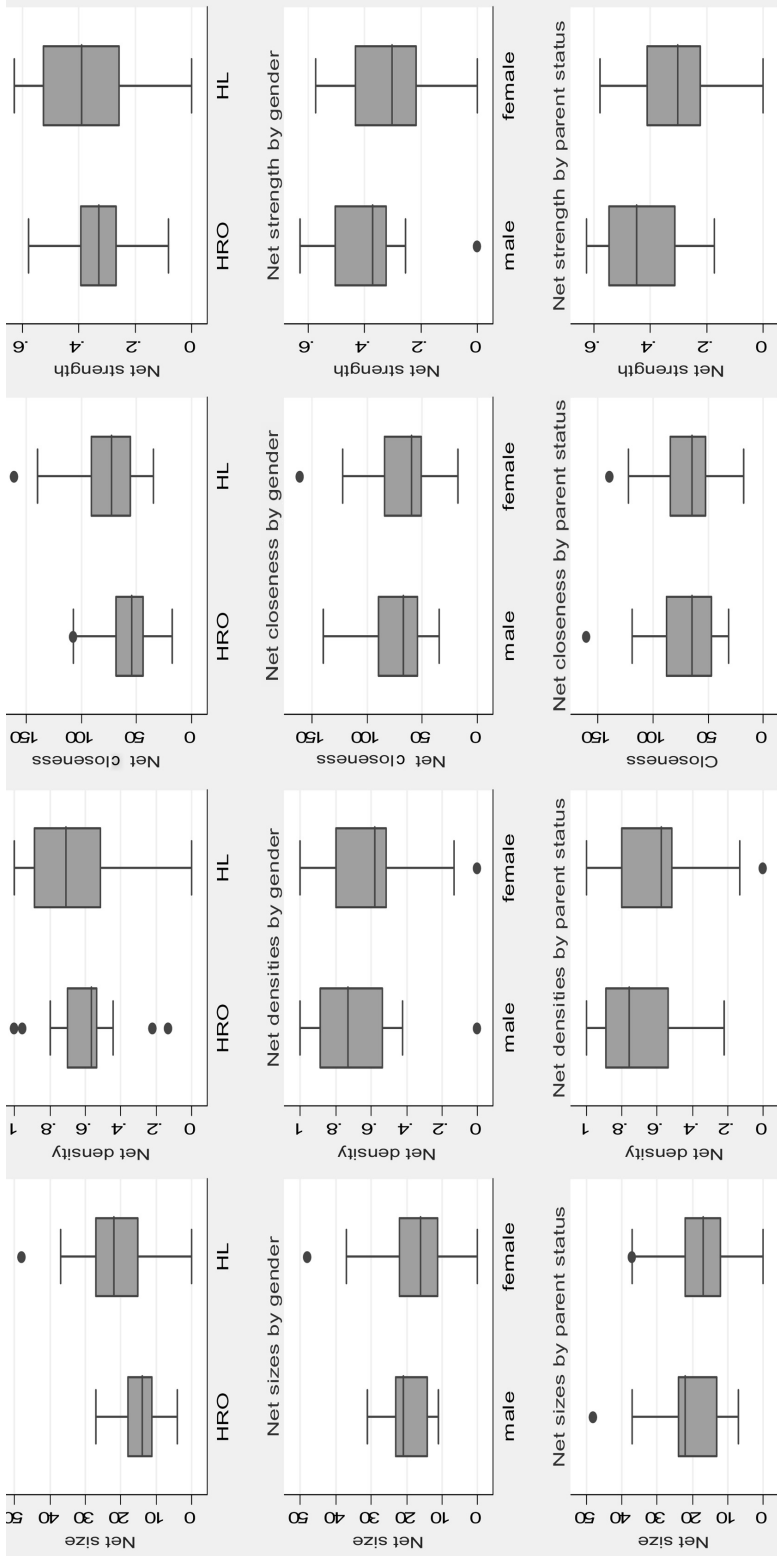
The first thing to notice is that in our Rostock sample the range of variation in network characteristics is substantially lower (the interquartile interval is considerably shorter than in Lübeck). This concentration around the median values means that an apparently small difference in the median values may be significant. These differences are, in fact, significant as to the network size and the degree of the network partners' closeness to Ego, both of which are lower in Rostock. This is not surprising and may be attributed to the large outward migration from Rostock following the *Wende* (the period of German unification): The population decreased by 20% within the 10-year period from 1993 to 2002 (Voigt, 2004, pp. 115, 120). It is little wonder, then, that our respondents from Rostock frequently mentioned what we call a "friend drain." The Rostock young regret that many of their fellow students of the *Abitur class* of 1994 are no longer living in Rostock or spent considerable time elsewhere before returning to Rostock, with the result that physical distance slowly turned into relational distance.

The second row displays the differences between men and women independent of the city of reference. Here, the range of variation is large for both sexes. When the network of women and men in Rostock and Lübeck is considered in separation, however, gender differences emerge for all characteristics in Rostock, with most women experiencing a smaller, looser, weaker, and less tight structure in their personal relationships than their male counterparts.¹² However, the large heterogeneity in the network structures within the groups (interquartile differences are very large in our western German sample) seems to indicate that gender is not a discriminating factor there, at least in our sample. The last row in Figure 1 is particularly interesting. It shows the results of a comparison between the network characteristics of parents and childless people. The similarity between the two subgroups is remarkable. Density is the only factor that is relatively high in the parents' group, and this is due to a higher quota of kin in the network. Besides this closeness, strength and size are not significantly higher or lower for parents. This is interesting as the literature usually points out large changes in networks after the transition to parenthood (Etrich & Etrich, 1995).

There are other *compositional characteristics* of networks beyond these "classical" structural features, such as the quotas of female or male network members, kin ties among network members, married network members, those who are parents, people of the same generation, people resident at a given distance, and so forth. Our research design provides not only a rich choice of different kinds of networks when drawing comparisons across subgroups but also the possibility of creating new subgroups of respondents according to criteria that come up during the research process. For instance, insights can be gained from comparing respondents in relation to which type of school they attended during their adolescent years (in our case *Realschule* vs. *Gymnasium*). But quantitative comparisons can also be made across less usually identifiable subgroups that emerge from the qualitative analysis of the interviews, such as different groups of dyads characterized by same-gender or mixed-gender composition.

These thoughts point to research directions that clearly reach beyond the scope of this article and for which the current data do not suffice. In future work, we will expand our investigation to hypotheses on social influence, hypotheses we develop through the interpretation of the qualitative material of the interviews. For instance, as we have reasons to

Figure 1
Comparison of Network Characteristics by Subgroups of Respondents (by City, Gender, Parental Status)



Note: HRO = Rostock (eastern Germany); HL = Lübeck (western Germany).

believe that dyads of peers are an important unit of analysis, we may want to test whether dyads composed of people of the same or different gender, social status, age group, and so forth produce different predictions of the synchronization of family behaviors. Additionally, we may want to hypothesize that (and, subsequently, to test whether) structural effects vary depending on different types of family and fertility behavior; these effects, for instance, may be greater on having a first child than on having a second one or on the decision to marry.

Conclusions and Discussion

In this article, we have presented the findings of two case studies on the structure of social networks, on social interaction with close friends, and on the links to the formation of family intentions of young adults in eastern and western Germany. The two studies are comparable as they share a common research design, which includes an integrated application of qualitative and quantitative methodologies. Using an empirical comparative case study, we have shown the way in which mixed methods research differs from a simple juxtaposition of the results of the qualitative and quantitative parts of a research project. Using qualitative and quantitative methods in a concurrent way rather than sequentially has the invaluable advantages that they are made complementary by a common research question and sampling strategy as well as by a common understanding of data analysis.

We highlighted two important elements of family formation processes, namely, *individual and structural characteristics of their networks* and *social mechanisms*. The former elements are, for instance, the individual's family status and the quality of his or her friendship relations and the size and closeness of his or her network. The latter are the social mechanisms that directly influence individual intentions about family formation, such as social interaction in terms of alliances or the contagious effect of the parental experiences of close friends. Our approach shows significant cross-references between individual and structural characteristics and social mechanisms. For instance, the social influence conveyed through social interaction in dyadic relationships needs to be analyzed jointly with information on the degree of reciprocity involved in the relationship and the family status of each individual involved. Similarly, the observed differences in network size in the eastern German sample underline the relevance of recurrent references to the "friends-drain" in the narrative parts of the interview. The cross-references between the quantitative and qualitative part of the same analysis makes for the strength of the mixed methods approach when compared to a single-method approach or to a triangulation of different sources.

We conclude with a detailed discussion of how a comparative mixed methods approach is best indicated to tackle our initial research question.

First, the comparative part of the project was designed on purposeful grounds. We began our sample selection with the observation that empirical findings revealed different fertility behavior and social networks in Germany by region and by educational strata of the society (e.g., eastern and western dyads, individuals with a higher and lower education). When compared to a haphazard case selection procedure, this comparative setup has

the advantage of extending the reliability of the results. Being theoretically instructed, our sampling decisions go further than just providing exploratory insights and can be grouped among the *concurrent comparative mixed methods designs* (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003).

Second, the sampling of cases in the two settings was guided by theoretical reasons to better target the research question (Creswell, 2003; Kemper, Stringfield, & Teddlie, 2003; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In our study, we sampled for relatively homogeneous cases, using the school class approach to control for the major a priori sources of variation in the process under study. As we aimed at detecting the differential impacts of social networks, we purposefully reduced other sources of influence on the networks and intentions, such as age and the socialization background. Because the whole sample was interviewed and the respondents were requested to fill out maps and a structured questionnaire, our sampling strategy can be defined as a *concurrent nested* strategy, with the quantitative instrument being quasi-nested in the qualitative interview (Creswell et al., 2003).

Third, we applied an established analytical procedure used in qualitative analysis, namely, a derivative of the *theoretical coding* one (Glaser, 1965; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This method offers a tested coherent background of coding techniques as it prescribes a sequence of open and selective coding (Flick, 2002). Although a different choice is possible, we strongly advise to state clearly its methodological rigor and warn against relying exclusively on the illustrative power of qualitative data or their uncontrolled (or undefined) eclectic use.

Fourth, we gave particular consideration to quality criteria. The lively debate on the quality of qualitative research is far from over. There is an inherent conflict between the flexibility and openness necessary to draw a valid portrait of the individual case and the need for standardization required for a valid comparability across cases. We handled this conflict by using two types of methodical elements addressing the two types of validity required: (a) We gave standardized narrative incentives and provided the same network chart/grid instructions to obtain sufficient ground for comparisons across cases, and (b) the narrative incentives were followed up with considerable flexibility during the follow-up of the interview.

Last, we made sure that there were constant exchanges and communications between the researchers involved during all phases of the project—from the conception of the project to the data collection and interpretation—to ensure comparability and quality. To meet the great amount of work involved in a comparative mixed methods study, three researchers were assigned to the interviewing task. Each of them cross-read the interview transcriptions as they were coming in to ensure some standardization in the instructions and clarifications given to respondents. The coding procedure was developed in a similarly collaborative fashion in order to minimize the potential interrater bias.

With it thus being a resource-demanding undertaking, mixed methods research has the unique potential to uncover far-reaching structural factors and the mechanisms of social processes. Moreover, such designs systematically benefit from the mutual stimulation and plausibilization of findings that the respective methods and cases offer. We have demonstrated this in our study on the role of social interactions for the formation and realization of family intentions in two societal contexts of Germany.

Appendix

Example for the Summary of a Dyadic Relation

The summary sheet contains the dyad ID, the basic sociodemographic data of the two friends, and an account of the interactions on family formation and parenthood between the two friends. To protect the privacy of our respondents, we left out some of the dyad descriptions and the occupation of the two individuals shown.

Summary Sheet: Dyad RD10

Friends	Rated Closeness of Friend	Age	Partnership Status	Parity	Current Occupation
Female Ego	3	29	Living apart together (details deleted)	Childless	(deleted)
Female friend	4	29	Living apart together (details deleted)	Childless	(deleted)

Interaction

From the viewpoint of Ego: Alter is a very close and inspiring friend. She perceives Alter as a spontaneous and nonplanning personality far from family plans right now, but maybe not so in the future. *From the viewpoint of Alter:* Ego is one of her few female friends and she does not perceive any family plans of hers. *Summary:* A sporadic but highly appreciated friendship of two friends that value independence. Especially the inspiring role model of Alter may substantiate Ego's positive attitude toward postponement of childbearing.

Notes

1. Despite the fact that the practice of using a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches in the same study is relatively established in the social sciences, the two approaches are merely used in juxtaposition to each other in most research designs. The consequence is that in most cases, each research approach is an independent process (parallel or sequential) and the results are combined only at the end (triangulation). There are good reasons for this practice, among others time constraints on and the different methodological skills and institutional affiliation of team members, but this makes communication during the research process difficult. The alternative to an ex post triangulation is to integrate the two approaches and to allow inferences between them at all stages of the research process (Teddle & Tashakkori, 2003).

2. If Alter is one of the respondent's parents or an individual who belongs to the parental generation, the interview is relatively short.

3. All participants were informed about the purpose of the study and gave consent to the analysis of their data. We guaranteed and maintained the full anonymity and privacy of the information given. It was crucial, especially during the interviewing process, to make sure that the interviewers did not reveal information about one respondent to his or her network partners.

4. The age range of close friends naturally was wider than that of the Egos.

5. The thematic structure (TS) was developed in constant interaction between the researchers involved. This sets us in a relatively safe position to make sure that interviewer or coder bias is as small as possible.

6. Unless it is self-explanatory, we indicate by (f) that a person is female and by (m) that he is male.

7. Conversely, this again indicates that *relevance* is an important precondition of *influence* in peer dyads.

8. We sort these "family statuses" heuristically into groups of similar experience with partnership and family formation: childless singles or childless couples who have just recently met, childless long-standing partnerships or marriages, and people with children.

9. For the numerical ratings of *importance*, see the description of the method.

10. Gender-specific forms of interaction on the issue of family formation emerge, although the number of dyads collected so far does not allow us to investigate the gender differences. We find the type of *alliance in desiring* exclusively in the dyads where both friends are women (two dyads), whereas *ignoring and postponement of the issue* is found exclusively in the dyads of male friends (three dyads). Similarly, there may be particular forms of interaction in mixed-gender dyads.

11. We test mean value differences with the well-known Welch's *t*-test and differences in the median with a Wilcoxon's test. These are the most appropriate tests for independent samples when the group variance is different.

12. The Wilcoxon's test shows highly significant values for all four variables (not shown here). However, the sample becomes very small (fewer than 20 individuals in each subgroup); therefore, the test needs to be interpreted as purely descriptive.

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