

# The influence of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control on union formation intentions

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## EXTENDED ABSTRACT PREPARED FOR THE IUSSP 2005

### 1. Introduction: union formation and the theory of planned behavior

Union formation is a complex process. In the past, with the almost exclusive prevalence of marital unions, marriage was a specific event with a clearly defined timing; nevertheless, the period preceding marriage could be considered as a process, with specific rites of passages and decisions. With the emergence of non-marital cohabitation, the process nature of union formation has become even more evident, with the timing of the start of a union not being clearly and univocally defined. The importance of individual-level decision making in the process of union formation is probably higher now than before, and so is the importance of bargaining between the potential partners.

Research on decision-making concerning union formation is however relatively scarce. Liefbroer and de Jong Gierveld (1993) applied the social-psychological model known as the “Theory of planned behavior”, proposed by Ajzen (1988; 1991) to study the choice between non-marital cohabitation and marriage, and to evaluate the importance of rational considerations and attitudes in such decision. In this paper we follow a similar approach, studying union formation within a theoretical framework based on a social-psychological model, specifically inspired by Ajzen’s model.

The theory of planned behavior provides a comprehensive framework to explain the process that leads to the formation of a certain intention and on the subsequent possible correspondence between intentions and behavior. This theoretical approach has been discussed and applied to the study of fertility intentions (Schoen et al. 1999; Billari and Philipov, 2005), migration (Abrams *et al.* 1999), and leaving parental home (Baanders *et al.*, 1998). Only Liefbroer and de Jong Gierveld discuss the application of this theory in the field of union formation, and specifically on the choice between cohabitation and marriage.

In this paper we investigate the role of attitudes, norms and behavioral control on the decision to ‘start living together’ by focusing on the determinants of union formation intentions. Figure 1 depicts the basic theoretical framework outlined by Ajzen. We can individuate two “proximate determinants” of behaviour: the intention to experience such behaviour and the effective possibility to experience such behaviour once the intention is formed (“control”). The evaluation of the relationship between

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intentions and behaviour is clearly tied to the presence of longitudinal data on intentions recorded at a certain time 0 and behaviour recorded at a certain time 1.

In order to study the decision to form a union it is crucial to focus prospectively, on behavioural intentions. Moreover, as intentions may change over time, our study of union formation decision-making focuses on a very specific intention (the intention to start living with a partner or not starting living with a partner), within a specific time frame (the next two years). We also need to take into account that starting to live together with a partner is a joint decision of a man and a woman. A difference in intentions between partners may indeed lead to a lower correspondence between intentions and actual behaviour.

According to the theory of planned behaviour intentions are formed with the contribution of three sets of factors (Figure 1). The first set includes *attitudes* towards the behaviour—i.e. statements regarding the plausibility that the behaviour would provoke a series of consequences, together with the relative evaluation of the positive or negative weight attached to these consequences. The second set comprises *subjective norms*, which are determined by normative beliefs—i.e. the perception that one individual has concerning the approval, or disapproval, of a certain behaviour by relevant others. The third set concerns *perceived behavioural control*—i.e. the perception of constraints and/or opportunities that exist concerning the specific behaviour. The relative weight of these three sets may depend on the type of decision to be taken (Ajzen, 1988; 1991) and on the context in which the intentions are formed as well.

[ FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE ]

## **2. Research hypotheses**

As discussed in the introduction, we put intentions as the key explanatory variables in the decision-making process. We are more interested in the social mechanism that creates intentions as a key to understand union formation decision-making, rather than on studying intentions as intermediate variables between background factors and actual behaviour.

Our main hypotheses are the following

*Hypothesis (1):* attitudes, subjective norms and control matter, net of background factors, as determinants of the intention to start a union.

*Hypothesis (2):* the impact of attitudes, subjective norms and control is gender-specific. Various scholars belonging to different traditions and from diverse point of views (i.e. Oppenheimer, 1988; Becker, 1991) have argued that men and women follow different union formation strategies. We expect that the importance of attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioral control varies by gender. More specifically, we may assume, also given the context of Bulgaria, that normative pressure is proportionally more important for women, while attitudes and perceived behavioral control are more important for men.

### 3. Data and methods

Our data come from a survey on “The young people- partnership, marriage, children”, carried out in Bulgaria in 2002. The sample includes 10,003 men and women aged 18-34, either in couple or single, and it is representative by age, marital status and region. The aim of the survey -- that has been jointly organized by the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research and the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences -- is to test theories that help in explaining recent massive family and fertility changes in a transition country (for a review of such changes, see Philipov and Dorbritz, 2003).

In the survey, some items related to the theory of planned behavior as applied to union formation intentions, attitudes, subjective norms and perceived behavioural control have been included. Most of these questions refer to a period of two years, due to the fact that control can be defined only in a specific period of time. The appendix reports the questions designed for the application of the decision-making model.

*Subjective norms.* In our case perceived norms are studied by asking the respondent about how important can be the opinions of influential others on his/her personal decision-making. For operational field reasons, however, subjective norms of relevant others concern marriage rather than union formation. Answers are combined in order to get a standardized indicator of subjective normative pressure.

*Attitudes.* Attitudes were represented by two variables. They were created using factor analysis, with two factors extracted from a set of seven items on perceived costs and benefits of union formation. It can be seen from the question on the attitudes (see question 603 in the appendix) that some of them are more related to the benefits (“positive” attitudes) of union formation, while others are more related to the costs (“negative” attitudes). The seven items were input in a factor analysis, and the factoring model was left to reflect interactions that could exist between some positive and negative attitudes.

*Perceived behavioral control.* Perceived behavioral control is studied with questions 604 and 926 (See Appendix). Evidently, each one of the four items from the first question is about the same as the corresponding item in the second question. The difference is that the first question asks about how much the decision to ‘live together with a partner’ would depend on each of the listed circumstances, while in the second question the respondents are asked to answer how much they are able to control the same circumstances. The control is expected to be most efficient when the person perceives an item as a significant one and is able to actually control it. The worst situation for the intentions is the case of a person considering an item as important, but perceiving it as being out of his/her control. We create first a variable for each item separately. This variable can take three values: +1 for the case of full control (both q604 and q926 are equal to 3 or 4), -1 for the case of the worst situation (q604 is equal to 3 or 4, while q926 is equal to 1, 2, or 3), and 0 for the other cases. The variable used in the analyses is equal to the sum of the four item-specific variables.

*Union formation intentions.* We use the following questionnaire item: "Do you intend to start living with a/your partner during the next two years?". The response options were: "Definitely yes; probably yes; probably not; definitely not".

The questions on subjective norms, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control as well as the variables created on their basis operationalize succinctly the theory of planned behavior. This operationalization has two major novelties. First, perceived norms reflect the normative pressure exercised by influential others on the formulation of the respondent's intention to form a union. We should note that the list of names that the respondent was required to fill was necessary for a broader study of social networks and social capital; the questions on norms can be reformulated without the requirement for keeping a list of names. Second, the theory is operationalized in a simple way that relies on a small number of effective questions and is potentially applicable to standard demographic surveys (in fact, a version of it has been implemented in the Generations and Gender Survey).

#### **4. Preliminary results**

We performed two logistic regression analyses separately for men and women on the sub-sample of single persons. The dependent variable is the intention to start living with a partner during the next two years. We grouped the categories "certainly yes" and "possibly yes" into one, as well as the categories "certainly not" and "possibly not".

The variables for subjective norms, attitudes, and perceived behavioral control were standardized with mean equal to zero and standard deviation equal to 1. Thus their coefficients (here expressed in terms of odds ratios) can be compared in magnitude.

We included several control variables (which are traditionally included in studies of union formation). Age is categorized in 5 age groups, the first four being 3 years wide and the fifth one is open-ended (i.e. 30-34 completed years of age). Three other variables are of particular relevance because they reflect the "objective" situation of the respondent in correspondence with the items measuring subjectively the perceived behavioral control. The household income per household member reflects an objective measure of the first item of actual (q926) and perceived (q604) control; the variable for the employment status of the respondent during the last three months preceding the survey, corresponds to the second item, and the variable on dwelling (number of square meters per member of the household) is an objective measure of the perceived effect of housing conditions. The questionnaire did not include objective measures of the health status.

Educational level of the respondent is a proxy both for human capital and for the individual's system of values. Mother's education is a proxy for the environment in which the person has been socialized.

The sample was stratified by 28 administrative regions in Bulgaria and voting sections in each region. We reflected stratification in a specific way, creating a cluster variable for the 28 regions, and urban and rural areas within each region. Thus 56 clusters are formed and considered in the analysis.

Table 1 presents the odd ratios in the two models. We give also the p-values for a better assessment of results that are testing a new theory.

## TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

### 5. Concluding remarks and further steps

Our preliminary statistical analyses reveal the usefulness of adding the constructs suggested by the theory of planned behavior to standard “objective” determinants of decision-making concerning union formation. Attitudes and subjective norms have a significant effect on the union formation intention, once controlled for background variables. The role of perceived behavioral control, on the contrary does not seem to be relevant (an analogous analysis of fertility intentions reveals that perceived behavioral control has no effect on the intentions to have a first child, but it has an effect on the intention to have a second child). As far as the second hypothesis is concerned, norms have a higher impact on women’s intentions, while attitudes have a similar effect across genders.

In a second and more sophisticated round of analysis before the conference, we aim to: a) to find out a more refined measured of perceived and actual behavioral control; b) to perform logistic ordered item response models by using the scores as proxies for latent variables (with one or more parameters) in the analysis of the subjective norms and attitudes.

It is important to note that the second wave of the survey will take place in the Fall of this year (2004). We expect to use the additional information about actual behavior concerning change of union status during the period of two years.

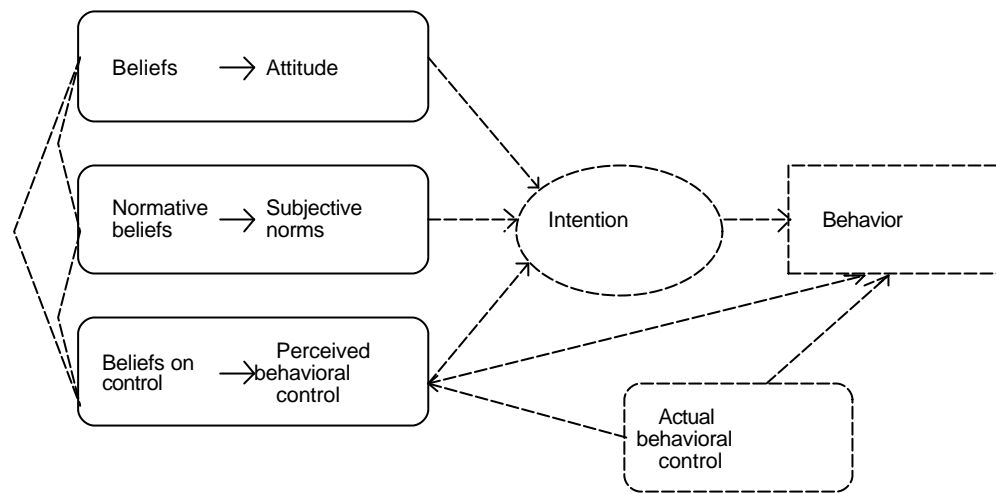
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## FIGURES AND TABLES

**Figure 1:** A sketch of the Theory of Planned Behavior (Ajzen, 1988).



**Table 1: Odds ratios and p-values for 2 logistic models**

	males		females	
	Odds	P>z	Odds	P>z
Norms	1.14	0.07	1.33	0
Attitudes:				
Positive	0.76	0.00	0.69	0
Negative	1.45	0.00	1.50	0
Control	1.03	0.48	0.90	0.14
Age:				
18-20	0.46	0.00	0.55	0.01
21-23	0.61	0.00	0.73	0.02
24-26 (base)	1	-	1	-
27-29	1.46	0.03	1.10	0.62
30 and higher	1.35	0.19	0.59	0.00
Education				
Below secondary	0.75	0.16	0.47	0.00
Secondary (base)	1	-	1	-
Higher	1.15	0.47	1.44	0.01
Household income per person:				
Lowest quartile (base)	1	-	1	-
2nd quartile	0.85	0.42	1.13	0.43
3rd quartile	1.00	0.98	1.17	0.30
Highest quartile	0.90	0.65	1.27	0.19
Dwelling, sq m per person	1.01	0.89	0.99	0.06
Employment:				
unempl. last 3 months (base)	1	-	1	-
employed last 3 months	1.43	0.00	1.21	0.06
Mother's education:				
Below secondary (base)	1	-	1	-
Secondary	0.84	0.32	1.09	0.59
Higher	0.87	0.51	1.39	0.05
N	2127		1564	

*Note:* The variables for norms, attitudes, and control are standardized with mean equal to zero and standard deviation equal to 1.



**APPENDIX:** Actual questions used for the application of Ajzen's theory of planned behavior

**NORMS**

The questions for the study of norms were included in a section 3, entitled "*Embeddedness in supportive relationships*". The respondent was asked a number of questions regarding diverse support given to or received by other persons. He/she was also asked to fill a list of their names.

Interviewer reads:

*By asking you the following questions, I would like to talk about the persons who matter in your daily life (relatives, friends, persons you know). Please enter their names in this list, ordering them with numbers like 1, 2, 3, etc. When asked, you will tell me only the number. I am not interested in their names. Do not enter one and the same person more than once.*

.... ..

**331.** Now, please tell me the numbers of up to five persons on your list whose opinion you value most highly when you make decisions about your private life.

Number                    ? ?      ? ?      ? ?      ? ?      ? ?

**335.** Imagine that you will marry during the next two years, irrespective of whether you really want to marry or not. How much would this person approve or disapprove this marriage?

- The person will approve very much ....      1
- The person will approve .....      2
- The person will approve somewhat.....      3
- The person will disapprove somewhat      4
- The person will disapprove .....      5
- The person will disapprove very much      6

(Note for clarification: this question is asked separately for each person whose number is filled in question 331.)

**339.** What is your relationship with this person?

Note: The answers are selected from a list of 23 possible relationships, including spouse, daughter, son, mother, father, mother of spouse, father of spouse, neighbour, friend, etc. (Note: in our case spouse, mother of spouse, father of spouse, are irrelevant as we consider only single people)

## ATTITUDES

**603.** To what extent do you agree with the following statements?

*(Interviewer, neither of the possible answers should be assessed as positive or negative.)*

	Living together with a/your partner, in marriage or non-marital cohabitation, would:	Comp. disagree	Rather disagree	Neither agree nor disagree	Rather agree	Comp. agree
<b>A</b>	..decrease your independence	1	2	3	4	5
<b>B</b>	..decrease your opportunities to pursue educational plans	1	2	3	4	5
<b>C</b>	...improve your financial situation	1	2	3	4	5
<b>D</b>	... decrease contacts with your friends	1	2	3	4	5
<b>E</b>	... increase the recognition you get from people around you	1	2	3	4	5
<b>F</b>	..increase the possibilities of realizing your family plans	1	2	3	4	5
<b>G</b>	...decrease the possibilities for your working career	1	2	3	4	5

## CONTROL

**604.** How much would your decision on whether to start living together with a/your friend during the next two years depend on the following conditions?

		Not at all	Rather not	Indifferent	Somewhat	Strongly
<b>A</b>	Your income	1	2	3	4	5
<b>B</b>	Your working or educational Situation	1	2	3	4	5
<b>C</b>	Your housing conditions	1	2	3	4	5
<b>D</b>	Your health status	1	2	3	4	5

.....

**926.** How much control do you feel you will have over the following circumstances in your life in the next two years?

		None at all	Little	Some	Much	A great deal
<b>A</b>	Your income	1	2	3	4	5
<b>B</b>	Your working or educational Status	1	2	3	4	5
<b>C</b>	Your housing conditions	1	2	3	4	5
<b>D</b>	Your health status	1	2	3	4	5