

## 1. Introduction

Past research on fertility determinants has shown that individual resources (e.g., opportunity costs resulting from women's education) and ideational factors, such as family and gender role orientations, both contribute to shaping fertility decisions. However, there is still a paucity of research concerning the influence of social contexts. Although studies examining effects of different "fertility regimes" varying across regions (measured by regional birth rates) on individual generative behavior have yielded rather mixed results, it seems plausible to assume that context effects often unfold via processes of observation of and personal interaction with network members, rather than being structured by geographic boundaries. Thus, the first aim of the present study is to identify different processes of network influence on fertility decisions. Specifically, three mechanisms are considered: (1) Social pressure, that is, perceptions of fertility-related expectations from network members (e.g., parents expressing their desire for grandchildren), (2) social support (e.g., anticipated childcare services by family members), and (3) "social contagion" (e.g., spreading of fertility decisions across network members).

A second focus is on comparing network influences across East and West Germany. Specifically, it is examined whether the marked differences in family patterns between East and West Germany found in previous research – a lower propensity to start a family, but higher rates of consecutive births in West Germany – are accounted for by differences in network composition. Finally, based on previous work tracing differences in the composition and function of networks in East and West Germany back to the pre-unification period, it has been argued that close family and friends have historically been of particular importance in East Germany as counterparts to the surveillance society created by the former socialist GDR regime. It can be assumed that these historical conditions have become part of the sociocultural inheritance. Hence, networks are supposed to exert more influence on individual fertility decisions in East Germany.

## 2. Method

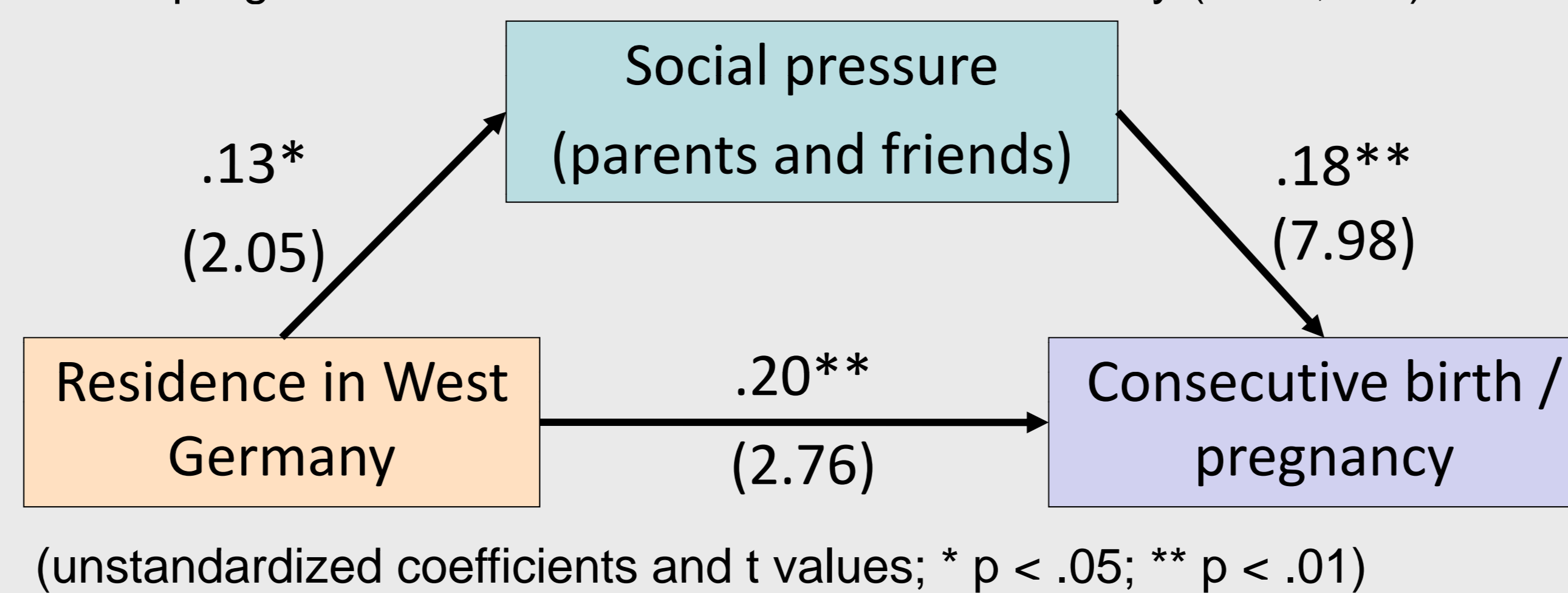
The longitudinal analysis is based on data from the first three Pairfam waves. The sample comprises fertile male and female respondents from West Germany (N = 6,502) and East Germany (N = 1,562). Across the period of observation, N = 92 first pregnancies and N = 319 consecutive pregnancies occurred.

Social pressure was assessed by two items (e.g., "My parents think that I should have a(nother) child",  $\alpha=.80$ ). A three-item short scale ( $\alpha=.76$ ) was used to capture social network support in case of a pregnancy (e.g., "In case of a pregnancy, to which extent would your environment support you in terms of money, time, and emotionally?"). Potential for social contagion was measured by the proportion of the number of children up to age 3, relative to the total network size. Probit path models were used to estimate network effects on the hazard of subsequent pregnancy.

## 3. Results

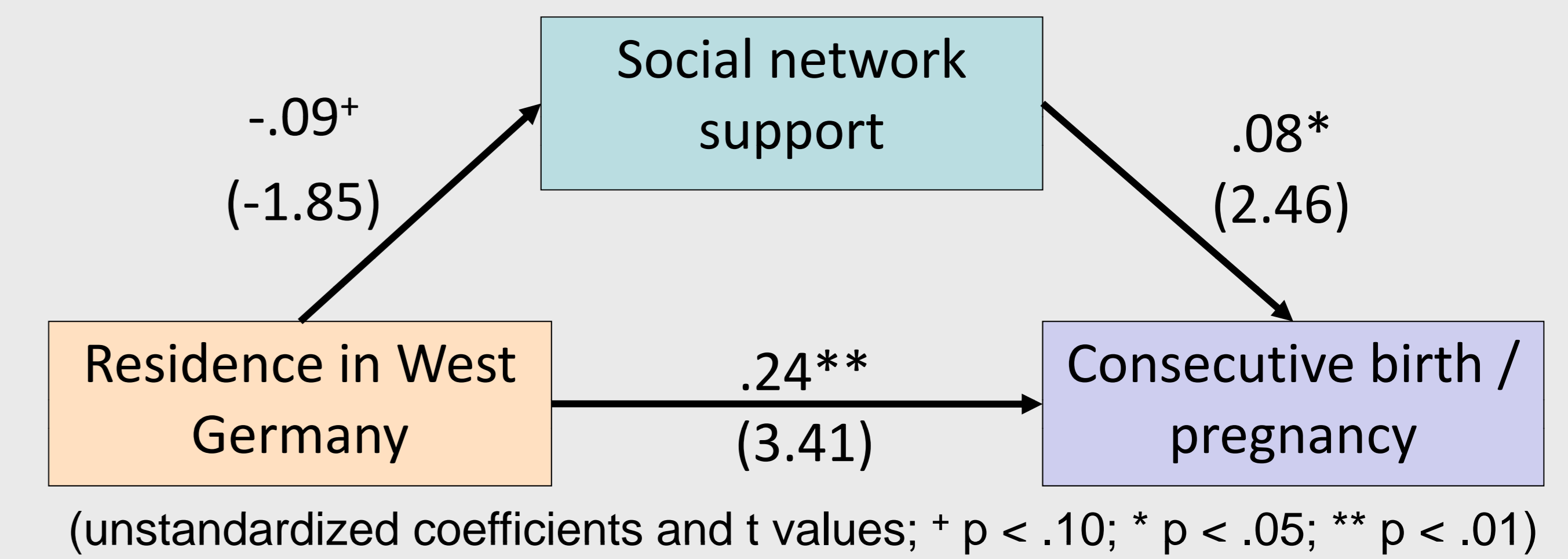
The analyses yielded evidence of a strong positive effect of social pressure from network members concerning respondent's decision for higher-order births (see Figure 1,  $b = .18$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Moreover, West German respondents perceived their friends and parents to exert more pressure towards having another child than East Germans did, which is consistent with the persistent differential family patterns found in demographic studies. In summary, differential perceptions of social pressure partly mediated the positive effect of West German residence on consecutive births, as indicated by a significant indirect effect ( $b = .024$ ,  $p < .05$ ). However, there was no evidence of variations in the size of the effect of social pressure between both regions, resulting in an insignificant interaction effect "West Germany\*social pressure".

Figure 1: Probit path model showing a mediator effect of social network pressure concerning differences in the likelihood of higher-order pregnancies between East and West Germany (n = 2,087)



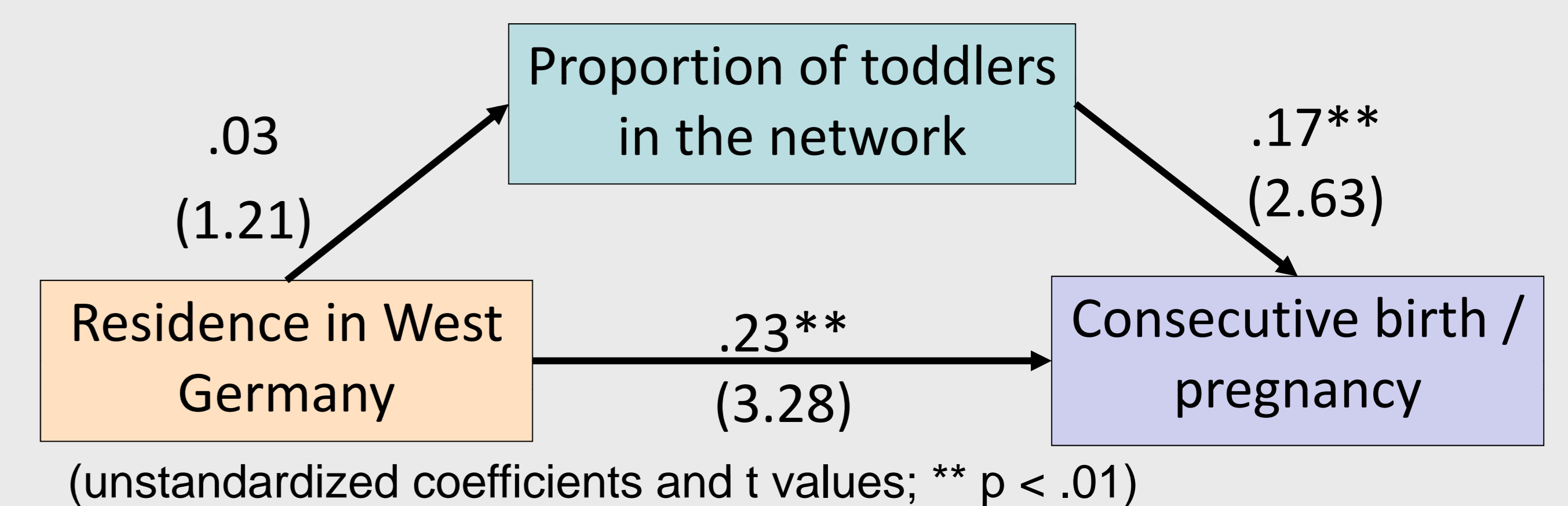
As to the second mechanism (see Figure 2), the expected positive effect of social network support was found for higher-parity pregnancies ( $b = .08$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The slightly negative effect of residence in West Germany on network support suggest that West German respondents anticipate less support from their networks.

Figure 2: Probit path model showing the effect of social network support on higher-order pregnancies (n = 1,891)



The third mechanism of network influences, social contagion, was also supported by the data. The higher the proportion of toddlers (i.e., children up to age 3) in the network, the more likely respondents were to subsequently opt for another child. As hypothesized, this effect was slightly more pronounced in East than in West Germany (interaction effect  $b = -.60$ ,  $p < .1$ ).

Figure 3: Probit path model showing the effect of fertility-related social contagion on higher-order pregnancies (n = 1,746)



## 4. Summary and Conclusion

The presented findings suggest that social networks play an important role in shaping fertility decisions. However, possibly due to limited statistical power, significant effects only emerged for higher-order fertility decisions but not for the transition to parenthood. A second key finding was that the higher propensity to have a consecutive child among West Germans could partly be explained by compliance with the stronger pressure from network members; the regional differential of these normative network influences may reflect differences in socio-cultural beliefs within the larger social context. Finally, the stronger impact of fertility-related "social contagion" processes in East Germany can be interpreted as a long-term result of specific socio-historical traditions contributing to a persistently high importance of strong ties.