



Is childbearing contagious?

Using panel data to disentangle mechanisms of
social network influence on fertility decisions

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Mechanisms of Network Influences

- Mechanisms through which networks may influence ego's childbearing decisions:
 1. Social contagion: Assimilation of novel behaviors from network persons (e.g., via direct influence in interaction)
 2. Social pressure: enforcement of social norms (e.g., concerning timing or spacing of births) throughout the network
 3. Vicarious (social) learning: Assimilation of behavior according to observed (expected) rewards
 4. „Social obligation“ (Bernardi): „child compatibility“ of network relations (e.g., joint leisure activities)
 - [5. Social support: prospects of receiving external resources (financial support, help with childcare) relaxes ego's anticipated time budget restrictions after transition to parenthood]

Theoretical Background

- What motivates people to take over network members' attitudes and behaviors?
 - Classical theoretical approach: Theory of Social Comparison Processes (Festinger 1954)
 - Mechanism: Attitudinal congruence generates positive affect, while dissonance may lead to (a) behavioral adaptation (alignment), (b) influence attempts or (c) exclusion of network persons (selection)
- Social Learning Theory (Bandura 1977): observation of observed / expected rewards and costs of parenthood in role models

Previous research

- Qualitative research in Germany and Italy (Bernardi 2003; Bernardi et al. 2007; Keim 2011; Keim et al. 2009): development of a typology of network influences
- Quantitative micro-level studies:
 - Contagion:
 - Inversely u-shaped effect of average number of children per network member on ego's childbearing intention (Bühler / Fraczak 2007)
 - TIP study (Kopp et al. 2010): birth events in the network increase childbearing intention
 - Lyngstad / Prskawetz (2010): similar timing of first births among 100,000+ sibling pairs
 - Richter et al. (in press): network influence most pronounced for higher-order births
 - Social pressure accelerates the transition to parenthood (Udry 1982, Barber 2001)
- Regional studies (Hank 2003): no context effects on fertility
- Macro studies (e.g., Kohler 2001)

Issues in Previous Research

- Mostly qualitative evidence (especially on contagion) → triangulation necessary
- Mostly cross-sectional studies targeted at childbearing intentions, whereas to date, few studies address actual fertility behavior
- Virtually no findings on mediating mechanisms
- Small sample sizes

Hypotheses

1. Contagion Hypothesis: Number of parents in the network has a positive impact on ego's transition rate to parenthood.

Intervening mechanisms:

2. Social Learning Hypothesis:
 - a) Parents in the network increase the salience of positive family life experiences.
 - b) Parents in the network convey a high relative importance of parenthood.
3. Social Obligation Hypothesis: Parents in the network are judged as more „child-compatible“ than childless network persons.
4. Social Pressure Hypothesis: Parents in the network may exert social pressure on ego to start a family.

Sample and Method

- Bamberger Panel Study on Marital and Cohabiting Couples (initially childless respondents from Western Germany, observed across four panel waves: 1988, 1990, 1992, 1994)
- Pooled dataset: $n = 1679$ couples taking part in at least two waves of the survey
- DV: First births and pregnancies ($n = 904$ events)
- Analytical approach: discrete-time event history analysis in the framework of path analysis

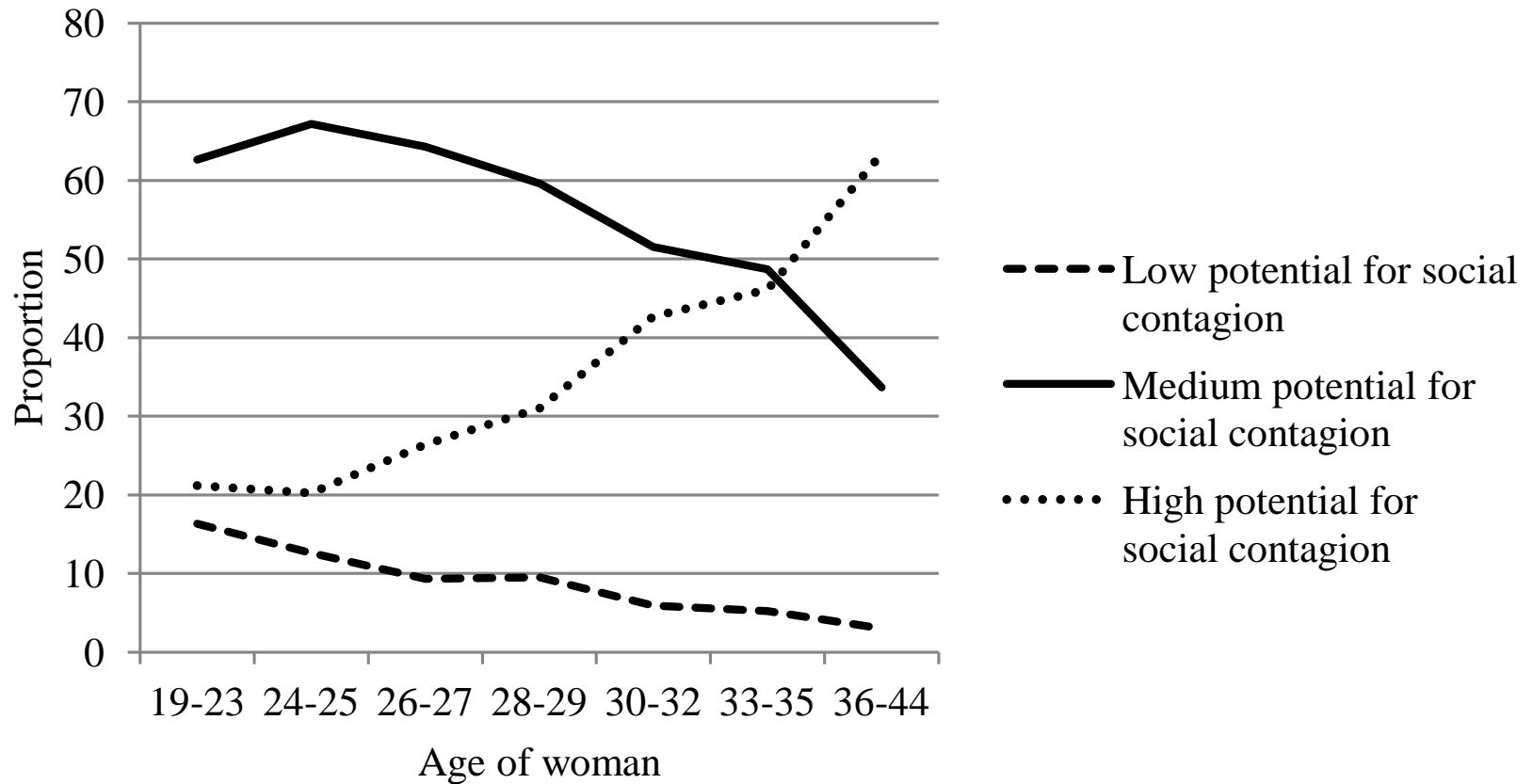
Measures

- Network definition: „Think of friends, relatives, acquaintances or other important discussion partners with whom you interact regularly“
- Potential for social contagion: Proportion of parents in the interactive network (response categories: none, some, many)
- Social pressure from friends: „Friends exert pressure on us to start a family“ (5-point scale)
- Model learning: Evaluation (positive / negative) of network persons' experiences with children (two items combined to a scale)

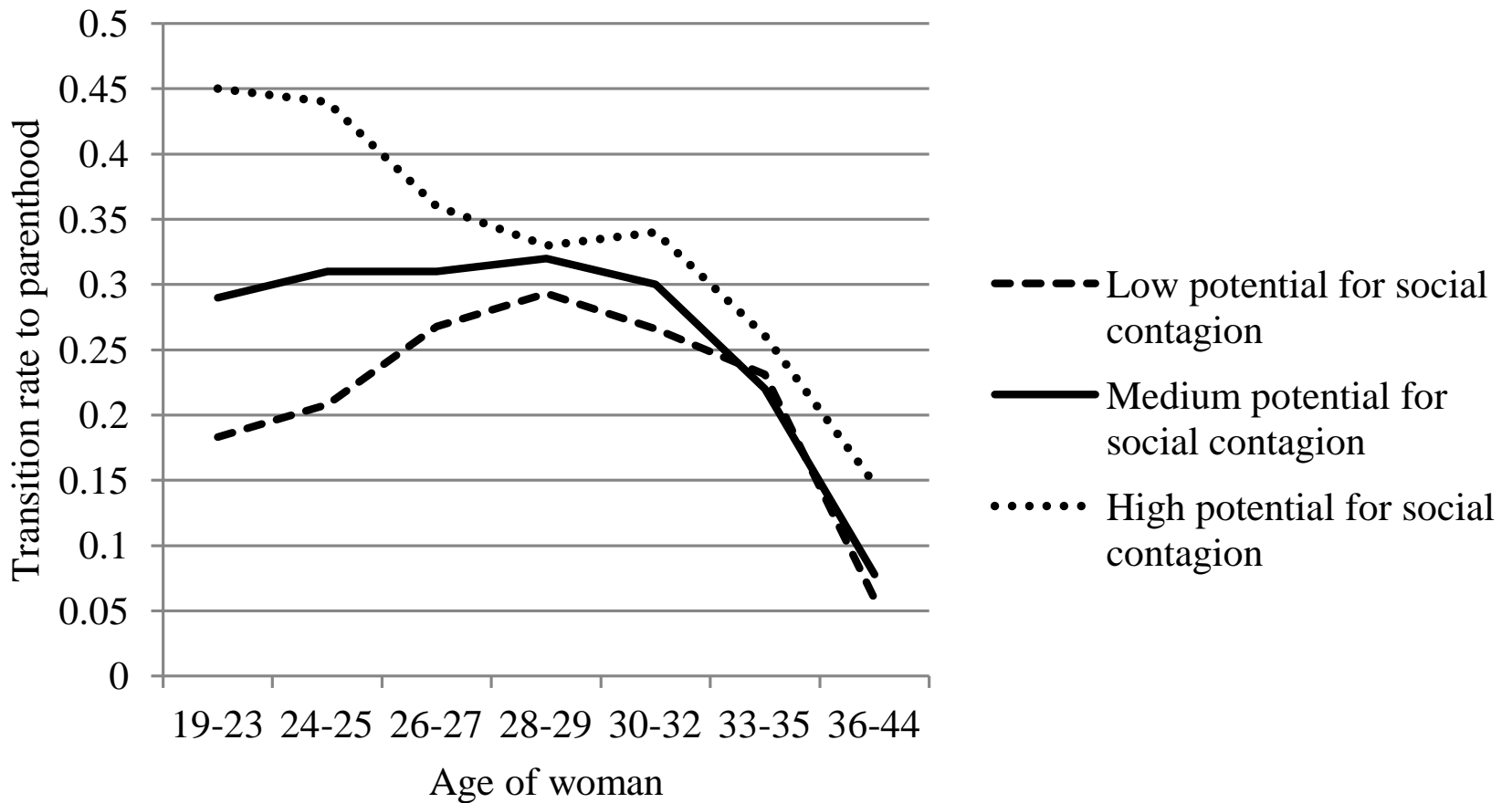
Measures

- Relative importance of parenthood (difference score), compared to other life domains (work, leisure, wealth)
- Social obligation: „Do you expect to maintain your current social contacts in case you became a parent?“ (3-point scale)
- Several control variables: e.g. network size, network composition (friends, relatives, mixed)
- Variables with substantial intracouple similarity ($r > .30$) were considered as couple means

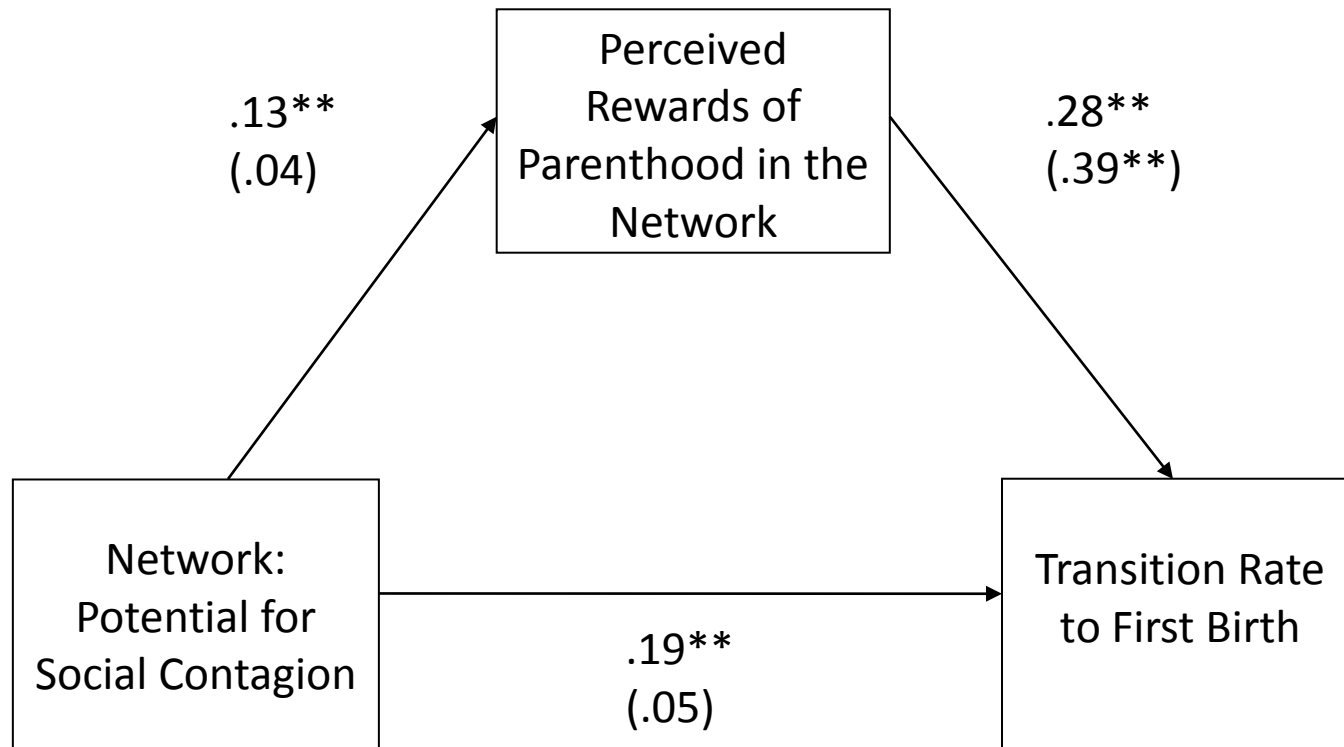
Descriptive Results: Potential for Social Contagion



Results: Size of the Social Contagion Effect across the Fertile Period

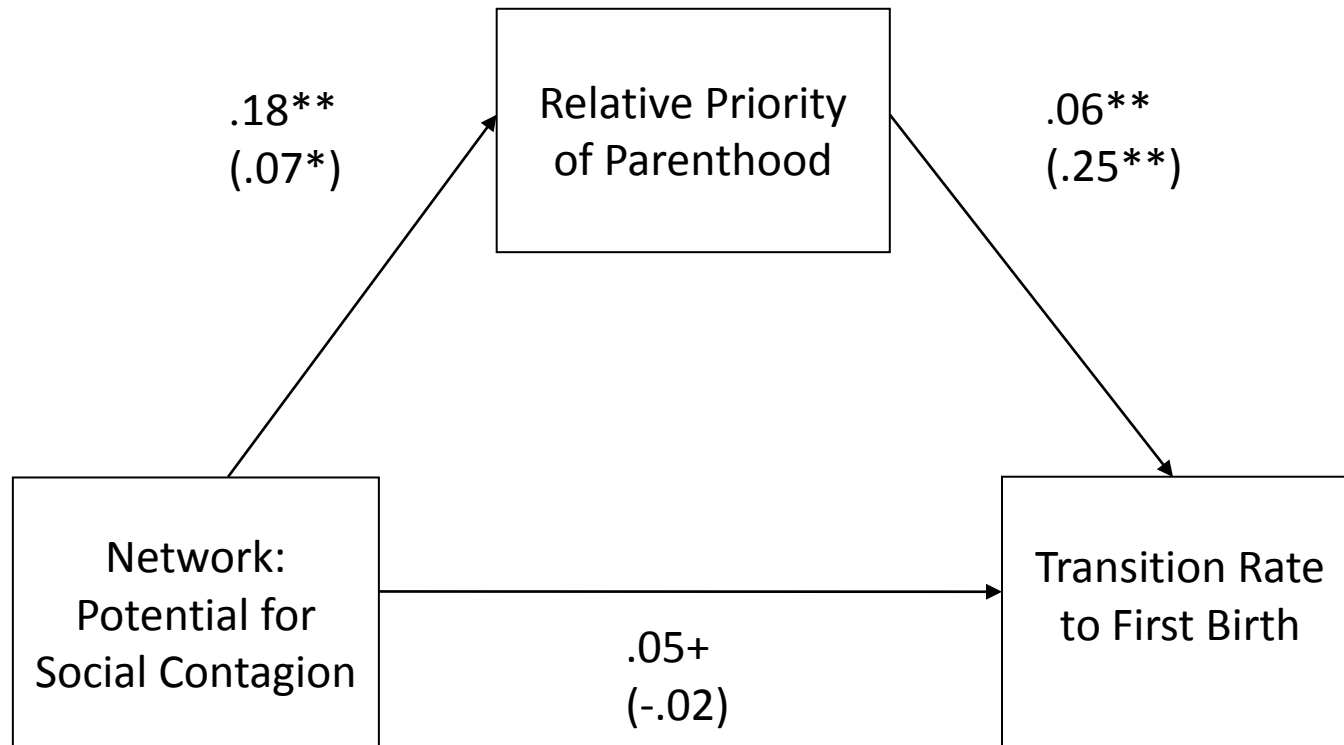


Results: Social Learning Hypothesis (a)



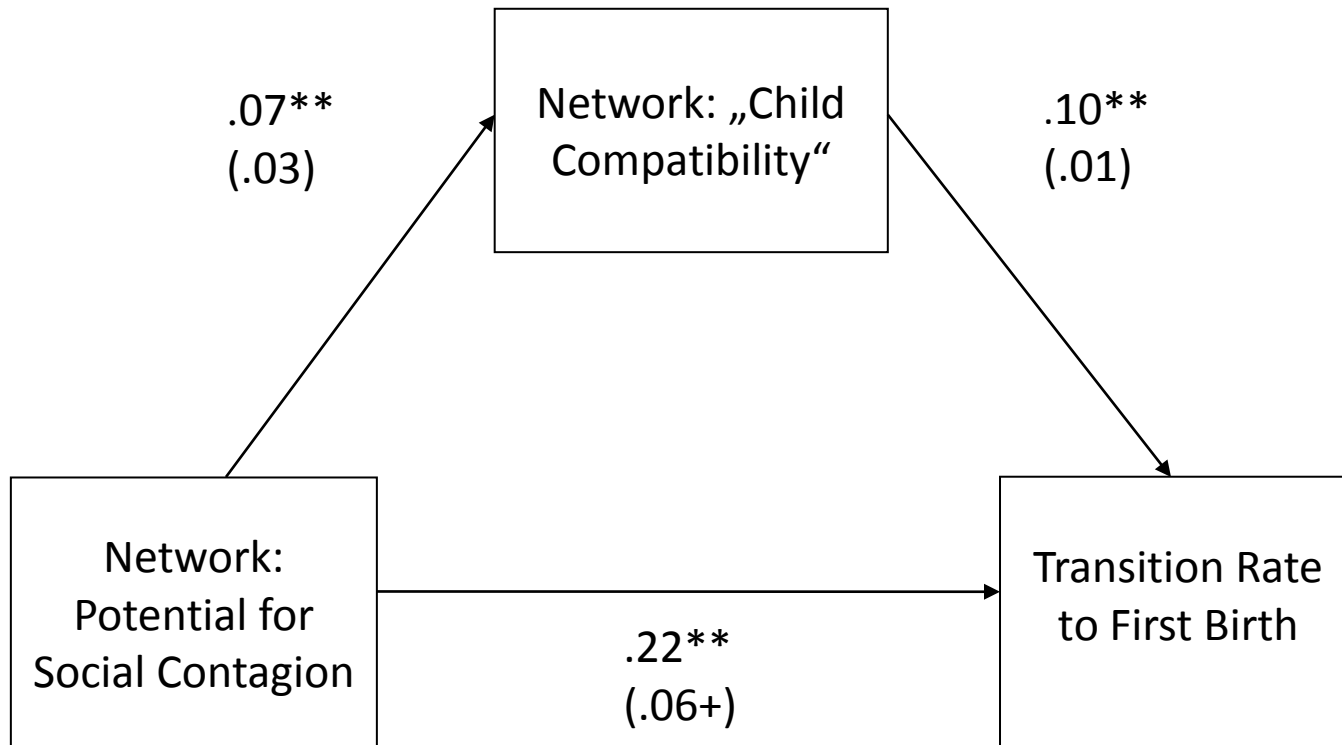
Standardized coefficients: Woman age 26 or younger (27 and older)
Controls: Age, partnership duration

Results: Social Learning Hypothesis (b)



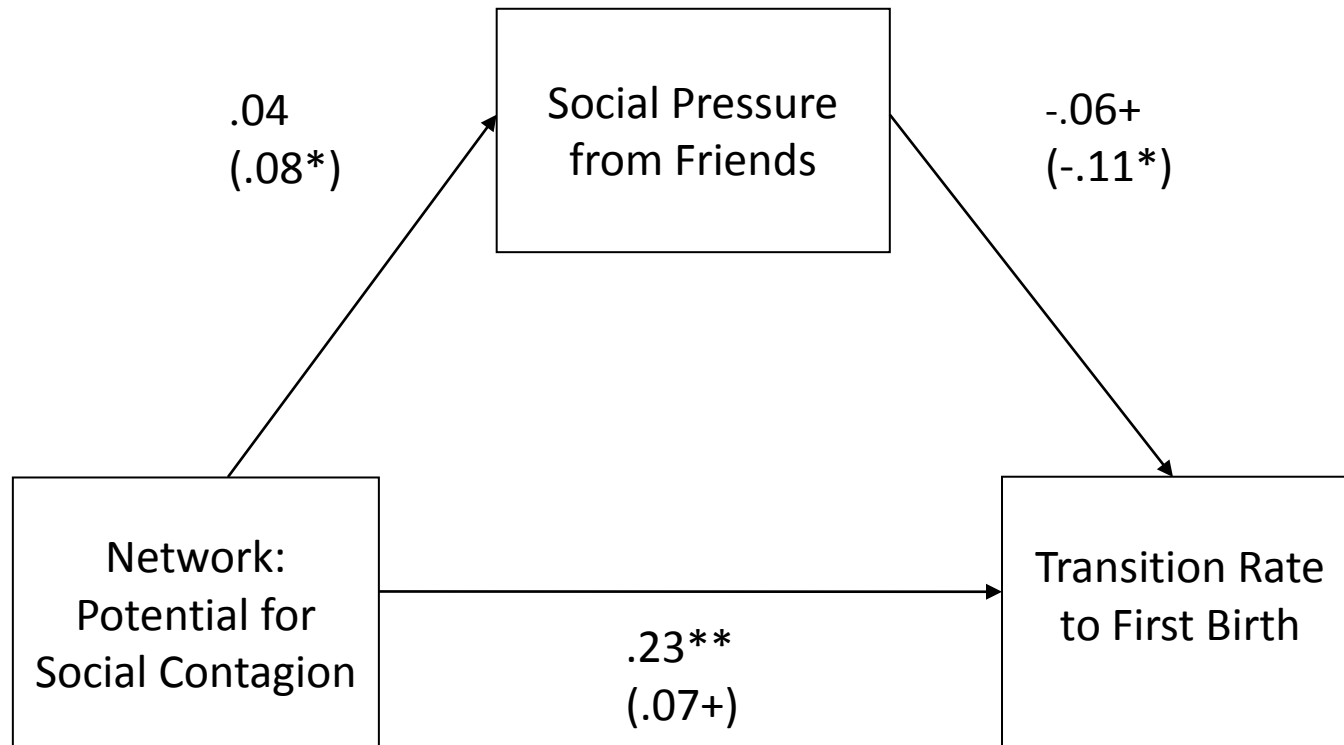
Standardized coefficients: Woman age 26 or younger (27 and older)
Controls: Age, partnership duration

Results: Social Obligation Hypothesis



Standardized coefficients: Woman age 26 or younger (27 and older)
Controls: Age, partnership duration

Results: Social Pressure Hypothesis



Standardized coefficients: Woman age 26 or younger (27 and older)
Controls: Age, partnership duration

Summary

- Social Contagion Hypothesis was generally confirmed for the transition to parenthood
 - Effect remains significant multivariately
 - Contagion is largely temporary (up to age 27), no effect afterwards
 - Reflecting secondary socialisation by peers
- Support for several bridging hypotheses explaining contagion: number of parents in the network increases
 - a) Opportunities for model learning
 - b) Relative importance of parenthood
 - c) „Child compatibility“ of networks
 - d) Social pressure from friends to start a family among older couples (however, this actually decreases the rate of first births)

Discussion and Outlook

- No data on individual network persons, just global network-related assessments
- Potential selection issues: Changes in network composition over time: To properly disentangle contagion and selection, it would be necessary to have data that allows tracing individual network members over time → hard to find!
- General conclusion: study of context effects may extend conventional life course perspective („linked lives“)

Thank you for your attention!

Control variables

- Network-related controls:
 - network size
 - network composition (friends, relatives, mixed)
 - social support (financial, practical and with respect to childcare)
 - social pressure from parents (perceived negative parental evaluation of respondent's childlessness)
- Other controls:
 - Age of woman
 - partnership duration
 - cohabitation / marriage
 - education
 - couple division of labor
 - partner agreement concerning the timing of parenthood