

# Visualizing Young Men's Fertility Desires: A View from Balaka, Malawi

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## Abstract

Fertility desires may not indicate precise plans; nonetheless, they contain important clues for understanding future fertility. On the basis of the dual assertion that fertility desires are (1) meaningful and (2) subject to revision with changing circumstances, this visualization provides a snapshot of young men's fertility desires using data from the Tsogolo La Thanzi study set in Balaka, Malawi. Scholars typically measure desires by summarizing how many children respondents would like to have (numeric) and when (timing). This visualization adds a third dimension, flexibility, asking how changing circumstances would alter fertility desires, as typically measured. HIV-related concerns reduce most young men's numeric desires while also accelerating family formation; the only scenario that increases desired fertility for many men is an imbalanced gender ratio in the family. Visualizing flexibility as a dimension of fertility desires clarifies that young men's stated fertility desires are often tentative and subject to revision.

## Keywords

demography, fertility, flexibility

Even though their future families may be far off, young people have ideas about how many children they would like to have in their lives and when they would like to have them. Fertility researchers regularly collect data on young adults' fertility desires, with the goal of forecasting where trends are headed. Fertility desires may not indicate precise plans; nonetheless, they contain important clues for understanding future fertility (Yeatman, Trinitapoli, and Garver 2020). On the basis of the dual assertion that fertility desires are (1) meaningful and (2) flexible (i.e., subject to change with changing circumstances), this visualization provides a snapshot of young men's fertility desires using data from the Tsogolo La Thanzi study set in Balaka, Malawi. Most scholarship on fertility desires focuses on women, and the phenomenon of flexibility has been interrogated recently in samples of women from Malawi and Kenya (Mueller et al. 2019; Trinitapoli and Yeatman 2018). But men have fertility desires too, and it may not be reasonable to assume that theirs align with what researchers know from studying women (Frost and Dodoo 2009).

Our visualization focuses on the flexibility of fertility desires, on the basis of responses from 476 childless, unmarried men between ages 15 and 25 in 2009. The mean ideal family size (IFS) is 3.3, and if everything in life goes as these men hope it will, this sample will father 1,562 children in

their lifetimes. Men in the sample desire to delay their first birth, most for as many as 5 years.

Following these questions about numeric and timing desires, interviewers asked whether their stated preferences would change or stay the same in response to 18 hypothetical scenarios. On the basis of a vast literature about constraints and supports to fertility, we group the scenarios into three broad categories: economic conditions (orange), family factors (blue), and AIDS-related concerns (red). Figure 1 summarizes the results. Scenarios are arranged from most to least susceptible to change on the basis of the numeric indicator, with arrows showing the direction and proportion who indicated numeric changes (fewer vs. more) and timing shifts (delay vs. acceleration).

HIV-related concerns reduce most young men's IFS, while also accelerating family formation; at least half say

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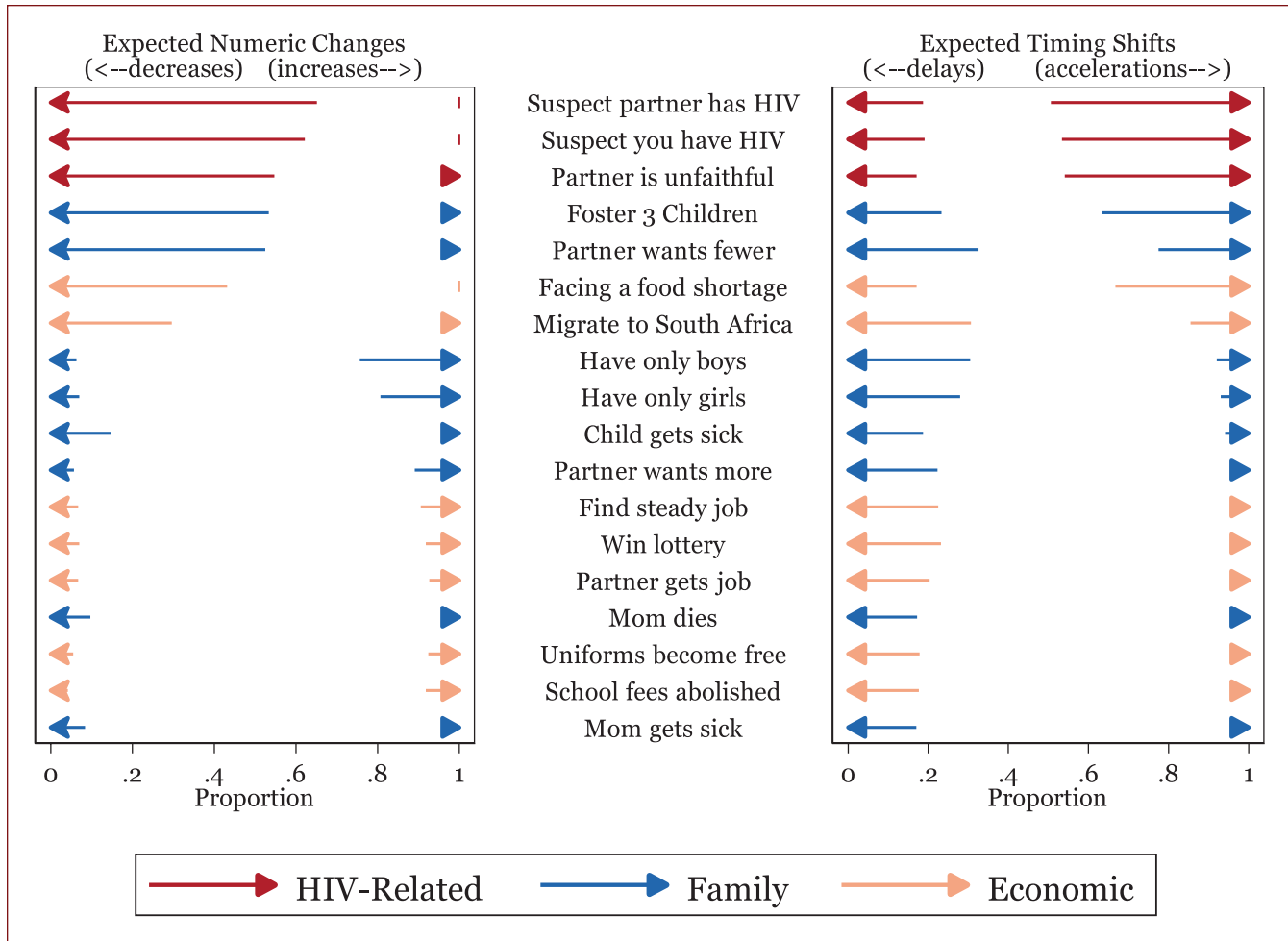
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**Figure 1.** A view of young men’s fertility desires, Balaka, Malawi.

Source: Tsogolo La Thanzi, Wave I, 2009

Note: *N* = 476 men between the ages of 15 and 25 in 2009. The figure depicts the flexibility of numeric and timing fertility desires as indicated by whether domain-specific (color-coded) hypothetical scenarios would alter the number (left) or timing (right) of stated desires. The lines of these adapted stacked bar charts represent the proportion who would change their intentions for each scenario (arrows) or leave them unchanged (white space). Scenarios are arranged from most to least susceptible to change on the basis of the numeric indicator, with arrows showing the direction and proportion who indicated numeric changes (fewer vs. more) and timing shifts (delay vs. acceleration). Pipe markers represent three scenarios to which no respondents reported an increase.

they would want fewer children if they or their partners suspected an HIV infection, but many would have those children sooner than originally desired. The scenario of food scarcity also reduces many men’s IFS, but positive economic changes provoke little change, split evenly between increases and decreases. The only scenario that increases IFS for a sizable proportion of men is an imbalanced gender ratio in the family. Consistent with previous research on gender preferences in sub-Saharan Africa, the desire for both male and female children is strong (Rossi and Rouanet 2015).

Previous research has shown IFS, timing desires, and flexibility to be predictive of future behavior. Visualizing flexibility allows us to see that when young people make statements about the families they want to have in the future,

many are articulating a tentative desire or a base preference rather than a fixed goal. They can simultaneously envision scenarios that would alter those desires over the course of their lives and speculate about whether and how those scenarios are relevant to their fertility. To understand how flexible the fertility desires of young adults in other populations truly are, researchers need to ask.

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## Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from National Health Sciences Research Council in Malawi and from Arizona State University, Penn State University, and the University of Chicago in the United States.

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## Data Availability

Tsogolo La Thanzi data are available to researchers through Data Sharing for Demographic Research.

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**Jenny Trinitapoli** is associate professor of Sociology at the University of Chicago, where she directs the Center for International Social Science Research. She has been the principal investigator of Tsogolo La Thanzi since 2008.

**Abdallah Chilungo** holds a BA from Chancellor College, Malawi and an MA in Bioethics from University of KwaZulu Natal, South Africa. He is the founding and current director of Tsogolo La Thanzi Research Center in Balaka.

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