

From Intentions to Behaviour: Reproductive Decision-Making in a Macro-Micro Perspective

The Vienna Institute of Demography (VID) of the Austrian Academy of Sciences coordinates a project entitled “*Reproductive decision-making in a macro-micro perspective*” (REPRO), which is carried out within the 7th Framework Programme of the European Commission. The key message of REPRO is that reproductive decision-making is essential for understanding childbearing behaviour and fertility trends. People construct intentions to have children and analyses show that these intentions frequently remain unrealised. This insight brings a new approach to policy construction: measures will benefit from focusing explicitly on the reasons for the frustration of these intentions and may particularly help in alleviating obstacles—where this is feasible—which impede their realisation. Findings have shown that possible important areas of intervention are job insecurity, gender equality and the reconciliation of work and family. Indeed, these are among the main obstacles that prevent families who want to have children to fulfil their desires.

The application of the socio-psychological Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB) helps to understand fertility intentions and identify policy approaches towards providing support for their realisation. Conventional policy instruments such as child allowances and parental leave support the individual by providing time and finances for child care. Theoretically, they support what is known, in the TPB, as the person’s *perceived control* over having a child. However, the application of the TPB showed that subjective norms and personal attitudes towards childbearing play an important role in the formation of intentions to have a child. Hence the conventional policy instruments can be insufficient to stimulate the construction of intentions to have a child.

Individuals construct their childbearing intentions in a macro-environment characterised by welfare regimes, family policies and cultural settings. Reproductive decision-making and behaviour are a consequence of the complex interplay between the individual and these macro-level factors. Due to the complexity of this scenario, policies which may work in one country will not necessarily translate well into another country.

Our discussion that policies and social actors may aim to help people realise their childbearing intentions does not have anything in common with the pro-natalist needs of a society. Support for the fulfilment of individuals’ or couples’ intentions is a service to people, which is provided to avoid cases where people might feel distressed by not being able to have their intended babies. These services have no particular macro-level aims such as raising birth rates. Support in fulfilling such intentions is needed independently of whether or not an increase in birth rates is desirable, although it can be expected that the fulfilment of intentions to have children will ultimately raise fertility.

The REPRO project unites the efforts of scientists from Austria, Bulgaria, France, Hungary, Italy, the Netherlands, Norway, Switzerland and the UK. More details can be found on the project's web-site (www.repro-project.org) or by contacting the scientific co-ordinator Dimiter Philipov at the VID (dimiter.philipov@oeaw.ac.at).

A major REPRO event is the conference organised by the VID under the title of this project at the Austrian Academy of Sciences (Theatersaal, Sonnenfelsgasse 19, 1010 Vienna) on 2-3 December 2010. The conference will be attended by 100 participants. The topics outlined above will be considered in more detail by renowned scientists in presentations, two debate sessions and a keynote speech by Icek Aizen, a founding father of the TPB. The conference agenda is available at <http://www.oeaw.ac.at/vid/in2b/>.

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