

# Child Intentions – the Starting Point in Demographic Behaviour

*Norbert Neuwirth, Andreas Baierl, Georg Wernhart*

Austrian Institute for Family Studies,

University Vienna, Austria

Recent surveys on demographic behaviour show wide differences regarding the height of the child intentions within the populations surveyed. This is due to a couple of factors: First, the age cohorts surveyed are quite different. Some surveys focus on young adults and/or even on adolescents. Others capture the whole fertile age span or even exceed these boundaries to control for differences in birth cohorts regarding child intention norms. Second, (remaining) child intentions seem to be easily directly surveyed, but, as continuous methodological experiments show, this is definitely not the case. Small differences in formulating survey items targeting child intentions or even exactly the same wording within different phases of the interview show considerable differences widely apart from statistical standard errors. This is considered to be due to at least two circumstances: First, primarily adolescents and young adults haven't "stabilised" their child intentions. Within these age classes child intentions – regardless of the concrete formulation of the respective survey item – show widest variations. Second, each survey item on child intentions addresses as well on personal ideals derived from reflected social norms as on feasibility within recent personal circumstances and future plans. Formulation and position of the item turn the survey question either rather to personal ideals or rather to personal feasibility. This shifting effect can become quite heterogeneous: younger cohorts rather tend to refer their (recent) personal ideals while older cohorts move to feasibility considerations. Males in this respect seem to feel young for longer periods, although the age differentials to their recent partners do not support this feeling. Ethnical and educational status seem also to shift the influence area of these poles.

Within the Gender and Generations Programme (GGP) of the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) this central issue has been surveyed via a harmonized representative survey in each participating country. Compared to respective surveys, at least in Austria, the mean numbers for child intentions seem to be rather high. But – as we should have a harmonized instrument now – we could have come to the position to develop internationally comparable empirical instruments that separate the "initial child intention" (ICI) of younger cohorts from the "later child intention" (LCI) of the older, where "young" and "old" are not solely functions of age but also of life events the respondents has passed.

The analysis follows mainly the theoretical framework of the "Theory of Reasoned Action" (Fishbein/Ajzen, 1975) and it's extended relaunch, the "Theory of Planed Behaviour" (Ajzen, 1991). We focus on the influence of "perceived behavioural control" (Ajzen, 1991) on the variations of child intentions, especially of age cohorts at the upper end of the fertile life span as we expect to capture the influences on LCI better with the controlling items surveyed within the GGP.

We designed our models in two alternative ways:

- (1) within a generalized linear models approach (GLM) and
- (2) on the basis of structural equation models (SEM).

While the LCI should be capable more directly via GLM the ICI is expected to be better identifiable by Principal Components Analysis of its hypothetical main factors and its compilation via SEM-methodology. Therefore we control – beside standard status indicators – for expectations of the respondents on personal events in the near future (e.g. changing the job; perceived stability of the partnership;...) relate this information to the respective event history path and to individual norms and attitudes.

The analysis will be focused on demographic behaviour in Austria, the main findings will be compared to selected GGP-countries.