

Field:

Social Sciences

Session Topic:

Towards a Unified Theory of Action for the Social Sciences

Speaker:

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Towards a Unified Theory of Action for the Social Sciences – The Case of Fertility Decisions

Fertility decisions are explained by different disciplines (economics, sociology, psychology) using mainly discipline-specific theoretical concepts. Numerous researchers have, however, expressed the dire need to spell out a common theoretical framework. This unified approach would be able to explain childbearing behavior in a more precise and encompassing way. Analyzing reproduction in all its facets is crucial for a projection of future developments in fertility rates. Why is this an important issue? On the one hand, we see declining fertility rates almost everywhere in the world, most pronounced in well-developed countries where this decline leads to problems in the sustainability of social support systems. Here economists and political scientists are in demand to advise the political elites in finding possible solutions. On the other hand, fertility rates are still rather high in the majority world leading to converse problems with high population density and hunger. Here, mainly the life sciences are working on solutions. The question of reproduction is related to almost every other field of scientific inquiry. After giving an overview of the development of fertility rates in the last decades and a projection of future development, a possible unified theoretical framework for explaining childbearing behavior will be discussed. Most of the numerous approaches proposed in the last 100 years argue either on the micro or the macro level. Well-known approaches searching for explanations on the individual level mainly stem from economic (*New Home Economics Theory*) or psychological (*Value-of-Children Approach or Theory of Planned Behavior*) studies. Older sociological theories mainly referred to the explanatory power of contextual circumstances on the societal level. In the last few decades this reductionism has slowly become obsolete and an increasing number of approaches try to overcome the limited focus by combining features of the individual level with societal characteristics of the neighborhood, the state, and so on, thus actively pursuing analyses of a multilevel structure.

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