



“Experts predict that vulnerability of families with children will increase in the future, but policies can do something about it”

Interview with Bernhard Riederer

Bernhard Riederer is researcher at the Vienna Institute of Demography of the Austrian Academy of Sciences (ÖAW-VID). As such, he is part of the [Foresight research](#) within [Families and Societies](#). Even though predicting the future is an impossible task, this research has delivered findings on possible scenarios regarding the well-being and vulnerabilities of families with children in the future, which can contribute to orientate policymaking in Europe. In this interview, Mr Riederer explains what foresight in demographics and family policy is about, and the findings of the project in this field.



How could you describe the mission of the research on foresight within Families and Societies?

Our research aims to look into the future. Of course, nobody can answer questions about the future precisely: you will always make some mistakes, as unexpected occurrences will happen - developments that could not have been foreseen. Therefore, we tried to prepare scientists as well as policymakers for a variety of different types of futures; we sketched very plausible and very likely developments, but we also discussed very unlikely developments that might be some sort of surprise.

Furthermore, we focused on a number of questions like: What will be the most important topics for the future of families in Europe, and which factors might drive the future of families in Europe? Which family types will be endangered of living in vulnerable situations? Vulnerability has actually been the main topic in our research. We have also discussed policies that are necessary in order to stop the intergenerational reproduction of vulnerability.

Within these areas we have analysed some specific issues in more detail, like what might be the consequences of the gender revolution, or thought about "hot topics" like the future consequences that refugee flows may have.

To what extent are your findings sound enough to orientate future policymaking? Which methodological problems did you encounter?

It is obvious that nobody can look into the future: we only have past experiences and we need to start from the present or past state of affairs. That is why one can never be sure about how the future will look like. Surprises might take place: technological developments that we don't know yet, any kind of event that could change the situation dramatically, etc. We therefore

tried to prepare different scenarios of the future to find out which might be the most important factors affecting how the future of families with children will look like. We tried to do this by exploiting the knowledge of experts: a mix of scientists, stakeholders and practitioners. In focus groups, we mainly focused on practitioners to get some kind of different view from the one that is usually discussed in the scientific literature. In addition, two online questionnaires were conducted: one with experts and one with parents, including a large fraction of parents from large families, which - in many countries - are at higher risk of being vulnerable.

Regarding the complexities of our exercise, even exploiting the knowledge of experts was challenging, as it is not easy for experts to look into the future as well. When it comes to policymakers, they often have their goals: they know how they would like things to be and how to reach this target, but are not necessarily prepared to be confronted with alternative scenarios, i.e. how would you react if something is different from what you expect to happen. Therefore, what we have tried to do is almost an impossible task.

You organised focus groups with practitioners in six different countries. How did these take place? Do the outcomes of these groups reflect the diversity of welfare regimes?

Within our research on vulnerability, we organised discussions in six different European cities: Vienna, Brussels, Madrid, Stockholm, Warsaw and Bern. These groups discussed the different family types that might be vulnerable and future developments affecting vulnerability of families with children.

There were some general issues mentioned in all focus groups, such as the risk of single parent families to live under vulnerable conditions. Given the limited number of focus groups, it is not really possible to generalise with regard to welfare regimes. There are of course differences that could let you think that some outcomes are typical for certain parts of Europe or certain welfare regimes. In Sweden, for instance, gender equality was an essential value and goal, shared by everyone taking part in the focus group. In other focus groups, there were discussions on whether there are any negative side effects of female employment in case societies develop in the direction of a more gender-equal society, in the form of increased levels of stress for women and more psychological vulnerability of families.

Regarding migration, we saw a clear difference because migration histories of countries are very different: some countries are more sending and other more receiving. Discussions were more about emigration in Warsaw or Madrid and more about immigration in Switzerland or Austria.

You mentioned the arrival of refugees to Europe. How did you include this topic in your work?

The situation of undocumented migrants, especially minors arriving without their parents, was mentioned in the focus groups, which is why migration was included in the expert questionnaire study in which 175 experts across Europe responded to questions on the future of vulnerable families. While preparing this questionnaire, the so-called “refugee crisis” happened, and we asked the experts about what impact these flows of people could have on the future vulnerability of families with children. We asked them to distinguish between three different dimensions of vulnerability:

1. Economic vulnerability, which refers to financial aspects, particularly poverty risks.
2. Psychological vulnerability, referring to feelings of stress, anxiety or depression.
3. Social vulnerability, comprising stigmatisation, discrimination, a lack of social support.

Experts assume that economic, psychological and social vulnerability will increase due to the refugee flows in the next five years (2015-2020). With regard to long term consequences, they assume that social vulnerability is most likely to increase further. Thus, social cohesion might be at risk in European societies in the long run.

What are the other main conclusions from experts' responses to the questionnaire?

First, for all three dimensions of vulnerability (economic, psychological and social) experts predicted increases in the near as well as the far future, with the most pessimistic predictions regarding psychological vulnerabilities. Experts predict that the share of families whose members suffer from psychological vulnerability will increase in the next five years. In addition, three quarters of them expect that psychological vulnerability will further grow between 2020 and 2050.

Second, experts think that economic development is the most important factor driving the three dimensions of vulnerability. This is not that much about GDP growth, but about how unemployment and inequality in earnings will develop. Family policies were seen as important, but they do not expect large policy changes. Other factors such as work-family reconciliation or gender equality are perceived to be important as well - but not for all three dimensions of vulnerability. However, differences appeared between parents' and experts' views: for parents, what was most important regarding the future vulnerability of families was not the future economic development, they put more emphasis on the development of family policy and work-family reconciliation.

Another important message relates to the reproduction of vulnerability within families. There has been a large expansion of education, and education affects social mobility; the share of people that are at risk of poverty or social exclusion remained nevertheless rather constant during the last decades. There is some sort of reproduction as parental background and social heritage are still very important for individual life chances. Therefore, we have also discussed policy measures to stop the reproduction of vulnerability within the family. Here again, we found differences between experts and parents. For experts, the most important measures were providing flexible childcare options for pre-school children, organising assistance for children with special needs, making employers aware that it makes sense to care for the work-life balance of their employees, and providing education for all children already at an early age. More than half of experts said that these measures are indispensable or at least very important to stop the reproduction of vulnerability. For parents, the most important measure was making employers aware of the need to facilitate the work-life balance of their employees – which was also emphasized by experts. The need to offer assistance to children with special needs was also of high relevance for both. But, contrary to experts, parents attached much more importance to the support for stay-at-home mothers – one fifth of experts stated that such form of support would be irrelevant or even counterproductive in stopping the reproduction of vulnerability. There was already some polarisation regarding this issue in the focus groups with practitioners; for instance, one participant argued that people might get used to live from social welfare, which can be a barrier to coming out of a life in poverty. This raises issues such as how long should the support to stay at home last, or to what extent staying at home should be supported.

An important topic that appeared in the discussions of the focus groups was the care responsibilities within families: care for children and for dependent relatives, i.e. persons with disabilities and older persons. There seemed to be a tension between the vision that more services should be made available to address those care needs, and a vision that this should be the responsibility of families in the first place. What could you say about this?

One of the main topics of the discussions when it comes to the vulnerability of families was clearly the reconciliation of work and family life. This is a challenge for many families, because they often don't have the flexibility to stay at home to provide care, and/or there isn't enough external care supply to them. There was a general agreement that solutions are needed to tackle this problem, and that this is one of the major challenges for future policies. Most participants would prefer that more people in the family can work. Therefore, if you discuss it from this perspective, you usually drift towards arguing for more external support; but there are also some opinions advocating that the family itself should be strengthened. This all depends on personal background and political ideologies. In our focus groups, we aimed at collecting the largest possible variety of opinions on how things can develop in order to find more general conclusions in combination with the results of the questionnaires sent to experts (social scientists, professionals working for NGOs, etc.).

In many countries the role of grandparents is important in helping parents care for their children and allow them to reconcile work and family life. To what extent do your findings highlight whether this will be the case also in the future?

There are some aspects that are related to this issue. The first one is the question of raising children - having time for children and being able to hand on values to children. A multigenerational household, i.e. a household where grandparents are available, might have advantages in this regard. Second, parents can learn from grandparents how to be a parent, which was also emphasised in at least one focus group. Finally, according to experts, there might be a negative impact related to mobility necessary in professional work: if mobility rises, that might be stressful for families and it may also make it impossible to receive support from grandparents because of large geographical distances.

What policy recommendations can you deliver on the basis of your findings?

We describe some possible policy developments. Stopping the reproduction of vulnerability is a huge issue, especially in European countries where child poverty is rather high. In a lot of European countries poverty risks of children are above the national average. We have identified a reconciliation problem, and in discussing our different scenarios we also saw the importance of the fit between gender regimes and policies: if vulnerability of families with children shall be reduced, then the policy measures have to meet the needs of the families, which are dependent on general attitudes and corresponding expectations within societies; these attitudes matter, and there needs to be an understanding of the needs of parents. There is a real belief that policy can do something about the problems; experts think that policy reactions will be small, but, like parents, they believe policymakers can do something to address these problems.

As said, on the one hand experts assume that vulnerability of families with children will increase in the future. I think this is a very pessimistic picture, based on developments such as increasing inequality in earnings, a rise in job demands, greater geographic mobility required

of parents, etc. In their opinion, these factors will result in higher shares of vulnerable families. But, again, and despite the negative message, the people we asked think that policies can do something about it.

Regarding vulnerability reproduction, education is a key topic. At the same time, parents in our study were especially concerned about education and future labour market chances of their children. Education also matters in this respect, and practitioners highlighted that it is important that parents (of vulnerable families) are supported and receive advice on what opportunities exist for their children in a way that they can support their children in learning. There is also much room for improvement concerning other aspects related to education - in a narrow but also in a broader sense.