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## Childlessness – between Fate and Choice

### Abstract

Childlessness in marriage is still socially defined as otherness. It is a deviation from the current cultural standard and – as a consequence – it requires explanation and legitimization, especially when the otherness is deliberate. The aim of the conducted qualitative research was to establish personal definitions of the situation of childlessness in marriage applied by persons aged 50 and older. The study focused on cultural patterns of experiencing and validating this non-standard lifestyle. 21 interviews centered on this issue were conducted. The analysis of the obtained data showed that the most important variables determining the model of experiencing childlessness in marriage by the subjects were the causes of childlessness and the significance of having children in their individual hierarchy of values. In each individual case, the way of experiencing childlessness results from the configuration of the recognized order of motivation and evaluation. It also seems that the order of evaluation is significant to the entire functioning of these persons. It is relatively independent from the objective cause of childlessness.

**Keywords:** *childlessness, infertility, qualitative research, understanding, legitimization*

### Introduction

Depending on the cause, the literature assumes a basic division into two types of childlessness. One is the childlessness conditioned by medical factors (involuntary childlessness) and the second is the lack of children as an effect of a conscious choice of lifestyle – the so-called voluntary childlessness (Kalus, 2002). Data collected by the World Health Organization suggest that around 10–15% of women at

the reproductive age who desire to have a child, experience primary or secondary infertility lasting longer than 5 years (Mascarenhas et al., 2012). On the other hand, researchers studying contemporary family changes also point to a growing trend of childlessness by choice (Slany, 2002).

Theories concerning human development in late adulthood and old age are usually based on the assumption of a fundamental role of typical life events, related to family formation and raising children – and, later on, grandchildren. In his concept of psychosocial development, Erikson (2002) assumes that the motive power of the human maturing is a psycho-sexual pursuit of procreation. In this context, the lack of children, especially unintentional, constitutes a threatening factor, because it limits the creative possibilities of the individual and deprives them of the experience of procreation.

Childless persons can meet with negative social reactions: stigmatization or exclusion. Lampman and Dowling-Guyer (1995) proved that childlessness is generally evaluated as negative, but the disposition of the respondents is much more pejorative towards childlessness by choice, whereas unintentional childlessness meets also with sympathy and understanding.

The negative valuation of childlessness in marriage is an expression of the strength of pro-family and pronatalistic values. From the point of view of the sustainability of the social system, it is important for the social situations deviating from traditional norms of family life – if their elimination is not possible – to be included in the symbolic universe in force, so that they will not pose a threat to the current standards (Berger, Luckmann, 2010). Normalizing cultural models are produced (Szacka, 2003, p. 78), which indicate how to think, feel and act towards the troublesome social phenomenon. These standards are transmitted in the process of secondary socialization (Szacka 2003, p. 138), which is remarkably intensive towards persons who take up non-typical social roles.

The process of the neutralization of non-standard institutions may take on two forms: therapy and nihilation (Berger, Luckmann, 2010). The aim of the therapy mechanism is to define non-standard situations in socially approved categories. It leads to defining childlessness as a lack, failure in a social gender role and contributes to the medicalization of this phenomenon. In the process of therapy it is assumed that not having children is always unintentional. The proper way of playing the role of a childless person is standardized by psychological conceptions of a crisis situation and the course of the process of adaptation to childlessness, (Kalus, 2002, p. 24).

The nihilation, in turn, relies on negating the reality of phenomena or their interpretation and conferring on them a cognitive status that cannot be treated

seriously (Berger, Luckmann 2010, p. 168). Nihilation is applied towards people who are childless by choice, because they reject the fundamental assumptions that each married couple should have children and each adult human being, especially each woman, desires to have children.

## **Research method**

The aim of the presented research was an in-depth study of childlessness as a life experience as well as the detection of varying cultural models of experiencing childlessness in marriage. A qualitative research model in methodological terms of the humanistic coefficient was deemed to be the most adequate for the chosen research purposes (Znaniecki, 1988). A tentative hypothesis was proposed: among persons who experienced marital childlessness for different causes, there will be differences in the definition of their own life situation. In accordance with the ideas of the grounded theory methodology, it was deemed appropriate to limit the initial research conceptualization to broad research issues in order to remain open to emerging empirical data (Konecki, 2000). In order to obtain adequate empirical data, problem-centered interview was utilized (Witzel, 2000, p. 1). Purposive sampling method was selected. The respondents were childless persons over the age of 50, who live or have lived in a formal marriage or informal partnership with a person of the opposite sex for at least 5 years. The empirical data was analyzed using the constant comparative method and the negative case analysis (Konecki, 2000). The sample encompassed 21 persons: 9 men and 12 women. The median age was 65 (range 52 to 85). The median length of relationship was 25 years (range 6 to 55). In most cases, physiological factors were the objective cause of childlessness. This concerned 12 respondents. For the remaining 9 persons the lack of children resulted from their lifestyles.

## **Findings**

The analysis of the research material allowed for the isolation of two basic orders of defining the situation of childlessness in marriage. The order of motivation refers to the subjectively conceived reason for childlessness and it includes six categories (Table 1), whereas the order of evaluation stands for the emotional and moral valuation of having children – and it encompasses four categories (Table 2).

In their individual reasons, the respondents usually employed multiple categories of motives, and sometimes also multiple categories of childlessness evaluation.

### **Personal definitions of the causes of childlessness**

**Table 1.** Ways of defining childlessness in marriage according to motivation

Causes of childlessness	Number of indications
Physiological childlessness	12
Postponed childlessness	7
Childlessness by God's will	6
Childlessness by choice	5
Childlessness caused by illness	3
Childlessness for economic reasons	3

The most frequent causes of childlessness were various physiological reasons. These respondents were mostly persons who desired to have children, were aware of the non-normativity of their situation and received treatment for their reproductive difficulties. Among these respondents, however, there were also persons who underestimated the objective causes of childlessness, drawing attention to their choice in the form of discontinuation of treatment. The statements of the respondents also indicate a definitely negative evaluation of infertility. It is viewed as a trait that lowers the value of a woman or man and requires compensation. When speaking of their infertility, the respondents used depreciating terms: *A bull without balls* (m, 55, se, ph<sup>1</sup>); *Unfit for children* (f, 77, pe, ph). This interpretation is consistent with the traditional understanding of the function of family and gender roles.

The second most frequent interpretation of the cause of childlessness was the postponement of the decision to start a family. This definition of the situation was cited mainly by men (5 persons). The sex of the respondents turned out to differentiate the subjective motives for postponing the decision to have children. For the men, postponing the decision to get married was a result of reluctance to start a family and take up the responsibilities connected with that – or a result of

<sup>1</sup> Codes of respondents: sex: male (m), female (f); age; education: higher (he), secondary (se), vocational (ve), primary (pe); cause of childlessness: physiological (ph), postponement (po), by choice (ch), illness (il), economic reasons (e).

difficulties with becoming independent from their parents, e.g.: *Because I was like, as they say, they called me Casanova. I was more in the parks, to have fun there, and stuff (...) and this bachelor's life of mine, I liked it, having fun, those parks (m, 66, ve, po)*. In the case of two women the postponement of the decision was associated with achieving educational ambitions and involvement in professional work.

Another relatively frequent interpretation of the cause of childlessness was seeing it as a result of fate, the will of a force majeure, e.g.: *God didn't give me children, because there was a reason (...) I always say that someone decides for us. Everything in life is for a reason, and we have no influence on that (f, 54, se, ph)*. This category was often cited by persons who were childless for causes evaluated as independent of their will. In the studied sample, those were exclusively women. Another version of this explanation was seeing childlessness as an effect of the malice of fortune, an incomprehensible and unfair judgment of God: *I always say that I wanted to have children (...), but the Lord God refused me this, this pleasure (f, 80, se, ph)*. The foundation of the non-normative lifestyle upon the socially-propagated faith in God's providence gives it a very strong legitimization. The female respondents subscribing to that interpretation believed in a traditional system of values – for each of them family was a dominant value, and having children was very meaningful.

The next category of having no children is personal choice. This cause was most frequently cited by the persons who consciously planned for childlessness, but also those who discontinued the treatment of infertility. The reasons for choosing childlessness in the studied sample are consistent with the findings of a number of previous studies (e.g.: Agrillo, Nelini, 2008). These were: a sense of incompetence, a fear of doing harm to the child, a fear of responsibility, no felt need, the influence of family experiences, economic reasons, professional ambitions or focusing on a high quality of relationship. The people who were childless by choice had a strong sense of the uniqueness of their lifestyle, at the same time, however, they usually did not see it as deviating from the norm. They opposed the stiffness of the rule of having children, claiming that a complete freedom of choice should operate in that matter: *Apparently, for me this imperative of motherhood wasn't dominant. For somebody, this is unimportant. Never in my life have I said to anyone: Why do you have a child? (...) I think that every human being should have this freedom of decision (f, 69, he, ch)*.

In the studied group there were three persons whose lives were subordinated to an illness or disability and in their interpretation this was the fundamental cause of their childlessness. Not having children was understood by these persons as a consequence of a broader health issue, as an element of adaptation to life with an illness. The ill persons are of the opinion that in their life condition the

lack of children was necessary, because their health would make it impossible to raise a child. The respondents pointing to this category of explanation have a high sense of uniqueness, otherness of their lives. In the case of a situation of illness, childlessness is, on the one hand, associated with a sense of regret and loss, but it is also rationally considered a desired norm in the given situation. These persons feel that they are victims of external circumstances.

The last of the identified categories of subjective causes of childlessness is a lack of children for economic reasons. In the statements of the respondents there were two kinds of material factors interpreted as causes for childlessness. The first one is the fear of lack of financial measures to provide for the children due to a low economic status, and the second is the reluctance to limit one's financial possibilities as a consequence of expenses for the child, when one's consumption aspirations and status are very high. The respondents citing economic causes were strongly concentrating on the insufficiency of financial measures and perceived the material needs of the child as very substantial, lowering the desired standard of living. In their evaluation, this cause was seen as resulting from fate.

### **Emotional and moral evaluation of childlessness**

The second basic order allowing for interpretation of the narrations of the respondents was the emotional attitude to their childlessness and the value of having children in their individual hierarchy of values. Based on this order, four ways of evaluation can be identified (Table 2).

**Table 2.** Ways of evaluating childlessness in marriage

Order of evaluation	Number of indications
Reconciled childlessness	9
Preferred childlessness	7
Unreconciled childlessness	5
Burdensome childlessness	4

The most frequently cited evaluation of childlessness is becoming reconciled with it. It is the standpoint of the persons who perceived their lack of children as a result of external factors. In their lives, these persons were faced with the necessity to modify their reproductive plans. At that time they mostly felt regret because of not having children, but they worked through their situation and became reconciled with it. They do not exhibit a sense of shame or wrong regarding childlessness.

In that group, childlessness in marriage is evaluated in concordance with the social norm as a negative phenomenon. The interpretation of the personal situation in the categories of norm, however, varies according to the importance attached to having children. The persons for whom parenthood was very meaningful evaluated their family situation as abnormal. This resulted in a strong need to compensate for the lack of norm: *The main reason is, well, unfortunately, a stroke of fate (...) whether you're sorry or not, you have to make a decision and not brood over it forever (...) well, one simply needs to accept this state, you can't pity yourself* (f, 76, he, ph). These persons engaged in helping their family of origin and sought alternative forms of meeting their need for caring, such as taking care of the children of their siblings or working with children; whereas the respondents for whom procreation was not a fundamental value did not have the feeling that their family life deviated from cultural norms. These persons attached more importance to the quality of life in a marriage union than to having children from it: *I know also such who are already over 50 and they haven't been married even once, so with me it's not yet as bad, because I've had a wife* (m, 66, ve, po). Also, the respondents who perceived their childlessness as a result of living with an illness, presented an attitude of reconciliation with not having children: *I became reconciled with it, I don't deplore that, because I told myself that I don't have to despair over this and that's it (...) with my illness that's for the better that I didn't have children* (f, 65, se, il).

The second most frequently mentioned evaluation category of lack of children is the preference of childlessness. This evaluation is applied by the respondents who consciously chose childlessness or postponed this decision. The persons preferring childlessness evaluate it in a very positive way. They think that the lack of children brought to their lives a pronounced majority of advantages. They do not experience regret because of childlessness, and without exceptions they have a positive attitude towards their decision. They perceive not having children in the category of freedom from limitations and an opportunity for self-realization. They are satisfied with their way of life and their decision. They describe their life as interesting and active and they are convinced that they owe its shape to childlessness, because parenthood would have deprived them of the means to pursue all their passions. In the experience of these persons, there is no space for a sense of guilt or inadequacy resulting from the non-typical form of their family life. They present a non-standard, postmodern way of thinking about family, in which children are a relative value and do not constitute a necessary fulfillment of a mature marriage: *I was a quality manager in a large enterprise in a construction corporation in Gliwice (...) all our free time were trips (...) theater, meetings (...) I think that with a child I can't imagine something like that* (f, 69, he, ch).



The persons who, in turn, postponed the decision to have children, think that thanks to childlessness they gained a pleasant, carefree young age and quiet and freedom in the old age: *I was like a free bird, I liked that (...) And if I had children now, I would have to strive for these children, for grandchildren, and it wouldn't be enough because of the paltry pension (m, 66, ve, po).*

The persons who have never become reconciled with the lack of children present an opposite evaluation of the situation. Those are the respondents who wanted to have children very much and who regarded the impossibility of procreation as a result of their own actions or unfavorable fate. They had a decidedly negative attitude to childlessness as a phenomenon. Those respondents experienced strong sadness, anger at themselves and a sense of guilt. The following statement is an accurate illustration of such attitude: *I have never concealed the fact that I miss this child, I have never been like this to speak somewhere with the family: I don't need this, what is it for, it's only a nuisance, in order to build up my person as so happy, because I wanted that. I never say that, that it was my choice. I don't believe that somebody can choose like this, not to have children, it's deceiving oneself, everybody needs a child (f, 54, he, po).*

For them, the deviation from the norm of starting a family is combined with a sense of poverty of life and regret: *As they say, a woman is unfulfilled. Likewise about a man they say that he should build a house, beget a son and plant a tree. So I am also unfulfilled as a woman (m, 55, se, ph).*

These respondents had a strong need to compensate for the lack of children. They demonstrated a strong commitment to infertility treatment and also to helping their family of origin, work with children or other caring behaviors. It seemed that these persons had not worked through their situation psychologically, and that blocked the possibility to become reconciled with their childlessness for them.

The last of the identified categories of evaluating childlessness is a sense of a painful burdensomeness of this situation. The persons presenting this attitude concentrate on the negative consequences of not having children such as the lack of company, help and care. They represent the type of attitudes characterized by a certain instrumentality towards the child as a value: *I always used to think that I would be healthy, that I am healthy, why a child, I will make it on my own. And now, after a brain stroke, paresis, a child would help me, or do the shopping. Now I have to go by myself, now one regrets it (m, 55, pe, po).* This definition of family situation is applied by the persons who decided not to have children in their young age, but after a time they started regretting it – two men whose health situation became much worse and a woman overburdened by the need to care for her parents. The respondents did not want to have children because they considered them an

unnecessary nuisance. For the most part of their lives they were very content with childlessness, and did not perceive the lack of children as negative or burdensome. In the case of the men, only the change of their health situation turned out to be of importance, and thus the intensity of the felt regret is very high. The lack of full self-reliance and the lack of care caused an overestimation of the significance of having children. The memory of a carefree youth has faded and at present the sense of the burdensomeness of life without children dominates. As for the woman, this experience is much less severe and she still experiences life satisfaction because of lack of children.

## **Conclusions**

The way of experiencing childlessness in each individual case results from a configuration of the employed order of motivation and evaluation. It seems, however, that the order of evaluation has a fundamental meaning for the entire functioning of the respondents. It is relatively independent from the objective cause of childlessness.

When defining and explaining their childlessness, the majority of the respondents referred to the traditional symbolic universe, based on Christian principles and collectivist values concerning the child as a desired and expected goal of family life. The dominant view of family is an institution based on a formal relationship of a woman and a man, called to realize the reproductive function. This norm was referred to even by those respondents who did not attach much importance to having children and allowed the deviation from this norm due to significant external factors. The vast majority of the respondents successfully acquired in the process of socialization models of experiencing childlessness based on the mechanism of therapy. What dominated was the acceptance of childlessness, in accordance with the psychological model of the process of handling this crisis, as well as a negative evaluation of childlessness as a phenomenon. The sense of regret or burdensomeness of not having children also conforms to cultural messages concerning the consequences of childlessness ("In old age there won't be anybody to hand you a glass of water").

When it comes to postmodern categories of recognizing childlessness, interpreted as a choice, method of self-realization or development of individuality, they were only employed by the persons who deliberately chose childlessness. It is worth mentioning, however, that the respondents in this study were persons who made their reproductive decisions in the sixties and seventies of the twentieth century.

The persons cited herein can thus be considered the precursors of a new cultural trend that will probably be gaining momentum.

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