

## **Values of Children and the lowest-low Fertility: the Polish Case**

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### ***Short abstract***

*Poland is one of the “puzzling-cases” where the lowest-low fertility occurs in a society strongly orientated towards family and children. As childbearing is still quite universal in Poland and the decline in TFR is mostly attributed to the reduction of the higher order births and some fertility postponement, it seems that economic and institutional factors are mostly responsible for that state of affairs. However, with our results we argue that deeper understanding of the value of children may improve the interpretations of the current fertility patterns. Drawing on a qualitative analysis we identify two key categories of benefits associated with parenthood. They relate to: (1) the image of the “normal” life course; and (2) the expectations as to the old-age. We show that given the value of children shared by the respondents, childlessness is not approved, while stopping at parity one may be an acceptable, even though not an ideal, solution.*

### ***Extended abstract***

In a context of extremely low levels of birth rates across Europe, understanding fertility choices is set as a priority goal for many researchers. And main component of any choice is an intention, which captures motivational aspects and defines a goal of behaviour (Ajzen 1991, Ajzen and Fishbein 1980). It indicates “how hard people are willing to try” to achieve something (Ajzen, 1991, p.181). The strength of motivation, in turn, depends directly on the attractiveness of the goal. To put it simply, the higher is a subjective value of a goal, the stronger motivation to pursue it (“subjective value-expectancy model”, Edwards 1954, 1961). Therefore, the first step to understand modern fertility choices is to comprehend motivation towards it and subjective benefits of childbearing: values of children.

In our study we address this issue in the Polish context, where the importance of the family and children is extremely high (Fokkema and Esveldt 2008, Frątczak and Balicki 2003, Giza-Poleszczuk and Poleszczuk 2004), but where the Total Fertility Rate has dropped dramatically over the last years. Since 2001 Poland has been recording the TFR below 1.3, which gives it a status of the lowest-low fertility country (Kohler, Billari and Ortega 2001). Also childlessness has increased in the youngest cohorts. Among the Polish women born in years 1945-1955 only about 8% had no children (Sobotka 2004). This share rose up to 15.5% for women born in 1965 and – according to available data – it is the highest one in the post-socialist bloc (Frejka 2008).

As studies consequently show that the Polish society is strongly oriented towards family and children, the fertility decline is mostly attributed to economic and institutional factors. With our study, however, we argue that a deeper understanding of the benefits of parenthood may improve our interpretations of the current childbearing trends.

We apply a qualitative research approach to investigate young Poles' motivation towards parenthood and the values of children that bring this motivation about. In our study, we explore 48 qualitative interviews, conducted in 2004/2005, with young couples at the early stage of the family formation process. For the in-depth content analyses, we employ the Grounded Theory approach (Glaser and Straus 1967, Straus and Corbin 1998).

The data reveal three main categories of the values of children. First, we identify an emotional dimension. Parents appreciate the joy of having children, unique feelings that come with parenthood and happiness associated with watching children's growth. The positive feelings and emotions connected to parenthood are universally recognized in the research on the values of children as the core group of benefits – especially in modern societies (Bulatao 1981, Fawcett 1988, Nauck 2000, Trommsdorff and Nauck 2005, Zelizer 1994).

The next two categories, following the normal life course and protection against the old-age, are less discussed in the literature but much more crucial for understanding the individual fertility choices of the respondents. We consider these categories in relation to the moment of the individual life course, at which they are activated. The **immediate** benefits of childbearing, such as “giving the status of an adult person” or “constitutes a family” are clearly related to the image of the “normal” life course. The **delayed** benefits, such as “protection from loneliness in the old

age” or “having inheritors” are connected to the unfavourable image of the old-age, which is universally shared by the respondents.

These two categories are not commonly found in the literature. Only in the very recent German study by Mayer and colleagues, “old-age security VOC [Value of Children] appeared as a separate factor, emphasizing the importance of reasons for having children related to the expectations in the far future” (Mayer et al. 2005, p.61). The factor, captured in their quantitative data, is virtually identical with the one we reveal in our interviews: it includes protection against loneliness, material and practical support as well as prolongation of self. Remarkably, in the German study also the dimension related to the family forming appeared and according to authors it “deserves special attention since it is a ‘new’ factor that did not occur in previous studies” (*ibidem*, p.60). The qualitative study at hand allows us to investigate these topics in greater details. Exploration of the two categories, related to the socially constructed image of the life course, shows that they are crucial for understanding why the parenthood is an indispensable element of life.

Consequently, a first contribution of our study to the discussion on fertility choices is a new categorisation of values of parenthood, which goes, so to speak, across the standard categories, presented in the literature. While studies on the values of children usually group them into emotional, material and (sometimes) social ones (Bulatao 1981, Nauck 2000, Trommsdorff and Nauck 2005, Klaus, Nauck and Klein 2005, Lindenberg 1991), we rather focus on *when* the benefits are activated.

Secondly, our results shed additional light on fertility patterns in Poland. We find that even though most respondents want to have two children, the values of the second (next) child are not very clearly envisioned and they are not discussed in relation to the parental life course. One kid seems sufficient to complete the „normal” cycle of events and provide some protection for the future. It is therefore likely that when parents face any constrains, they abandon the plan to have more children and stop at one. Even if such situation is not an ideal one – it may be an acceptable solution.

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