



Psychological phenomenon of “childfree” as a problem of modern youth

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of the study: The main purpose of the study is to identify individual psychological characteristics of people who consciously take the position of refusing to have children. The objectives of the study are a theoretical analysis of the main current approaches to the problem of "childfree" (conscious childlessness) and conducting an empirical study to identify individual psychological characteristics of people who profess the "childfree" subculture. The main hypothesis is the assumption that people who take a conscious position of refusing to have children have individual psychological characteristics in the sphere of value orientations and have differences in mental state (mood, well-being, activity). The sample consisted of men and women aged 18 to 40 years (average age 29±1 years, 35 subjects, pilot study).

Materials and Methods. The main research methods were historical, sociological, statistical, analysis, and comparison. The research methods included: Morphological test of life values by V.F. Sopov and L.V. Karpushin (diagnostics of life values of personality, MTLV); Schwartz Value Survey; WAM Questionnaire; author's questionnaire (gender, age, profession, income level, presence of children, education level, position towards childfree), mathematical-statistical method - Kruskal-Wallis test.

Research results. The main conclusions of the study are the statement of the prevalence of the studied phenomenon; differences in activity, mood, well-being; high degree of tolerant attitude towards representatives of "childfree"; prevalence of subculture among "childless" students and people without permanent income; artificial inertia of "childfree." Among childfree supporters, personal opinions, views, and beliefs predominate over conventional ones compared to those who raise a child and are not childfree supporters. Orientation towards constructive relationships, realization of social roles, and expansion of interpersonal connections are the main needs of subjects who raise a child. Weakly expressed statistical tendencies towards egoism and hedonism in people who consciously refuse to reproduce.

Conclusions. The Russian society has a relatively average index of readiness to start a family. The majority of respondents expressed their firm intention to have a family and children. The respondents take a neutral position on the Childfree movement. People who consciously refuse to procreate are engaged in improving educational activities, have unstable incomes and half dream of emigrating. In families with children, there are high values on the scales of well-being, activity, and mood. For subjects raising a child, an important aspect in the need-emotional sphere is social interaction with the possibility of forming their social status.

Keywords: childlessness, psychological safety, "childfree" phenomenon, childbearing, reproductive behavior, demography, inclusive capitalism, technological structure.

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INTRODUCTION

Global demographic trends reveal a significant decline in fertility rates, with World Bank data indicating a reduction from 4.7 children per woman in 1950 to 2.4 in recent years. This substantial decrease occurs despite improvements in socioeconomic conditions, accompanied by increasing rates of divorce and single-parent households across most nations.

Extensive research has documented the adverse effects of family dissolution and single-parent household structures on children's psychophysiological development. Studies conducted in the United States demonstrate that children from single-parent households encounter distinct challenges stemming from reduced parental support, manifesting in diminished academic performance, compromised interpersonal relationships, and lower overall life satisfaction. Foster care arrangements introduce additional complexity to these dynamics, further influencing children's developmental outcomes (Han, 2023).

Empirical evidence underscores the significance of parent-child interactions. Quantitative analyses reveal a positive correlation between parental engagement and child well-being (coefficient 0.1020, $p < 0.01$). Specifically, maternal involvement in life activities and leisure (coefficient 0.1030, $p < 0.05$) and paternal academic engagement (coefficient 0.3630, $p < 0.10$) demonstrate statistically significant positive associations with children's well-being. These findings emphasize the crucial role of emotionally secure parent-child relationships within the family structure.

From an evolutionary and historical materialist perspective, family formation and procreation represent fundamental aspects of social development and productive relations, facilitating cultural transmission and historical continuity. F. Engels posits that the production and reproduction of immediate life constitute primary determinants in historical processes, with the production of sustenance and human reproduction being mutually reinforcing phenomena. However, contemporary trends indicate an unprecedented deviation from these historical patterns, manifested in widespread voluntary childlessness (Engels, 1989).

The Russian Federation has begun implementing legal frameworks to address these demographic challenges. Within its national legal system, the traditional family unit is designated as a protected institution under state policy. Legislative provisions identify various factors contributing to family destabilization, including the propagation of non-traditional sexual relations and the dissemination of attitudes diminishing the value of family structures and procreation.

This emerging phenomenon of voluntary childlessness warrants comprehensive investigation, as it presents potential implications for both individual psychological well-

being and national security frameworks. Further research is necessary to understand the underlying causes and potential interventions for addressing these demographic shifts.

Theoretical development of the problem

In current time, we are observing a trend towards strengthening and spreading the so-called «childfree» movement (free from children). Childfree is a subculture that promotes a completely different ideal image of a modern family from the traditional one, in which the main values become bilateral relations between spouses, personal growth, financial well-being, and successful career advancement (Bicharova and Morozova, 2016). The term "childfree" itself is chosen taking into account the psycholinguistic features of perception in English transcription. Its ending "free" does not have a negative connotation or prohibition of anything when pronounced, but on the contrary, proclaims "freedom." There is a shift in meanings: "I am not without, I am free." Such cunning psycholinguistics, in our opinion, is aimed at the psychological legalization of this phenomenon, softening criticism, and increasing the acceptance index of all the narratives under consideration by young people.

Thus it can be assumed that the «childfree» phenomenon is a politicized movement, artificially created for economic reasons, and in some cases, there is an attempt to camouflage the problem as a "democratic movement," where it is indicated that "a person close to the same-named community of people who consciously chose to refuse to have children as their own reproductive strategy, considering this choice as part of their own identity and, possibly, defending their socio-political rights to it" (Lomakin, 2018).

A community of Asian scientists has established that «labels» created and applied by scientists in one context (referring to «childfree») and in one language cannot be universally applicable. At the same time, these same studies note that an aggressive policy in the field of childbearing cannot lead to positive results, but on the contrary - leads to an increase in the level of stigmatization towards people without children, which negatively affects their well-being (Gietel-Basten, 2023).

According to Khalvin R.R., the determinants of refusal to have children among representatives of "childfree" consist of the following factors: lack of confidence in the size of their income; psychological trauma in early childhood (cruel treatment by parents, social environment, incest, delegation of responsibilities for caring for younger brothers and sisters); rationalization (variation of psychological defense) associated with the impossibility of conceiving a child (infertility); egoism and hedonism (increased requirements for personal comfort); priority to life values in other areas (workaholism); feeling of dislike for children;

presence of fear before the physical aspects of reproduction of children, etc. (Khalfina et al., 2018).

To overcome the problem of childlessness, the implementation of a fair family policy regarding surrogate motherhood and adoption, with the appearance of appropriate benefits, is proposed (Leroux et al., 2022).

Bolshunova T. V. asserts that the causes of distortion of parenting values and the formation of dysfunctional families are violations of the moral and ethical sphere of personality, the spread of sexual deviations, decentralization of personality, as well as the loss of gender identity (Bicharova and Morozova, 2016). In this regard, the progressive biologization of humans, associated with the concepts of postmodernism, "inclusive capitalism," transhumanism, gradually displaces traditional models of behavior. Consistently and imperceptibly, the value of parents for the younger generation decreases, and therefore, so does the value of childhood. External circumstances, the accelerating rhythm of life, multitasking leave little time for attention to anything other than one's own problems, often individualized, existential, outside the collective field.

The well-known Soviet psychologist L.F. Obukhova, describing the biologizing concepts of Americanists, especially behaviorists, showed the place that was given to the child in these theories: "the child enters society as a 'rat into a labyrinth,' and the adult must lead them through this labyrinth, so that as a result they become similar to an adult. "The child is regarded as a being alien to society," notes the author (Obukhova, 1996). In this vein, it can be assumed that the dislike and contemptuous attitude towards children is conditioned by socio-economic globalization.

But such a position regarding children is fundamentally wrong, continues L.F. Obukhova: "The child is part of society, moreover, its most important part; human society without children is a dying society" (Obukhova, 1996). The Soviet psychologist understood that such dialectics could lead to extinction, to a demographic shift, which some foreign authors now discuss in a positive light. We dare to assume that it was in the biologizing chambers of American "science" that contempt for childhood as a socio-psychological phenomenon was born. And the "behavioral" pressure on demographics itself may be dictated by economic order. Thus, in 1995, the Fourth World Conference on the Status of Women was held in the United States, which addressed issues of birth control. This scientific event had a significant impact on the declaration of human rights, which affirmed women's rights to control their bodies (Cook Rebecca J. et al., 1996).

F. Engels mentioned the intolerance of large industrial capital to the process of reproducing offspring among workers and the poor in the mid-19th century in his works. Large capital sought to abolish any social achievements of the working people, their rights to "social benefits," support for large families, and much more. The European state (England) was not ready for such "ruin" from the workers. F. Engels cites an excerpt from an official report of representatives of large capital, whose goal was the widespread abolition of any social guarantees for workers, since this "...hinders the development of industry, encourages rash marriages, promotes population growth and paralyzes the influence of population growth on wages; that it represents a national institution that discourages industrious and honest people from wanting to work, and encourages the lazy, dissolute, and frivolous; that it destroys family ties, systematically prevents the accumulation of capital, spends existing capital and ruins taxpayers; that it, moreover, seemingly assigns a premium for illegitimate children in the form of alimony" (Engels, 1989). The author illustrates the interest of capitalists in reducing the birth rate among economically suppressed classes.

The ideology of childlessness directly leads to a dying society. Perhaps such a narrative is laid down as a prospective "roadmap" to launch an entire industry of "choosing, growing, and buying a child to order." Moreover, the fourth industrial revolution is freeing up a huge number of specialists, replacing them with "artificial intelligence technologies." And this is a serious socio-economic problem, the problem of the emergence of "superfluous people." Such an economic situation cannot but affect the demographic situation, actually forcing a reduction in birth rates worldwide. Here is how K. Schwab characterizes the problem of demography in the conditions of transition to the sixth technological order: "In emerging markets and developing countries (especially in countries with a 'youth bulge'), technologies risk turning the 'demographic dividend' into a 'demographic nightmare,' because automation makes it much harder to climb the escalator of economic growth" (Schwab and Malleret, 2020). The author convinces the reader that high birth rates can lead to stagnation processes in the economy. He defines the main goal of society's development as merely obtaining economic benefits, however, L. Morgan had warned his contemporaries against excess in the use of wealth: "the mere pursuit of wealth is not the final destination of mankind..." and further "the completion of the historical field, the only final goal of which is wealth, threatens us with the destruction of society, for such a field contains elements of its own destruction" (Morgan, 1934).

Meanwhile, Iranian psychologists in their studies of the problem of childlessness have found that the desire of families to have children depends more on cultural factors than on

economic variables. Also, in their opinion, the mass media are a mouthpiece for agitating the idea of one child and individuality. As a result, as the authors believe, financial and social support from the state, education of parents, as well as comprehensive efforts to change the attitude of couples to childbearing by politicians in the field of family health, sociologists, and the government can support and strengthen family health, achieve the goal of promoting policies to increase population and help prevent illegal abortions (Tori and Sharif-Nia, 2023). Conducting a theoretical analysis of foreign studies, we have become convinced that no nation, no culture, no confessional community is fully protected from the threat of extinction.

In our view, the growth of supporters of the movement under consideration can also be explained by the revival of followers of Malthus's theory, who believed that uncontrolled population growth leads to hunger and other social upheavals. In classical psychoanalysis, a woman's rejection of her feminine essence, her striving for career, feminism, and competition with men lies in the "masculinity complex," as a consequence of the castration complex. Some authors explain the rapid spread of the subculture of "refusal to have children" by discrimination and demonization of large families. Also, the devaluation of such phenomena as love, altruism, mercy, and such moral qualities as morality, duty, honor, etc., together lead to a decrease in motives for the birth and upbringing of children (Bolshunova, 2018).

Tatiana Nam in her research shows how the ideology of "childfree" is promoted through social networks. The main tools for popularizing these ideas, which are used mainly by women aged 20 to 40, are, for example, hashtags to photos related to carefree pastime "#childfreetime" (Nam, 2020). This can be subjectively perceived as creating a certain attitude that children can become an obstacle to entertainment and a full life. Young people see bright pictures of recreation, yachts, cars, houses on the pages of popular social networks – but do not see a child in the frame. Such a post is accompanied by many complimentary comments, "likes," support. A sustainable image of the desire to live in pleasure is cultivated, everything else is a burden, an obstacle on the way "to a happy life."

In our previous studies, we considered the phenomenon of "childfree" as a variation of "psychological sterilization" of the population through various information technologies (Deulin et al., 2023).

In modern Russian sociological studies, it is noted that a sample of young people (from 18 to 25 years old) reveals a tendency towards a more positive attitude towards the phenomenon of conscious childlessness and residents of large cities compared to other social groups. This alarming trend indicates a statistical shift in opinion regarding the phenomenon of voluntary childlessness (Levchenko, 2023)

METHOD AND METATERIALS

The purpose of this study

To examine, on a limited sample of respondents, the value orientations, biographical data, and mental state of individuals who consciously refuse reproductive behavior practices.

Sample

Men and women aged 18 to 40 years (average age 29 ± 1 years, 35 subjects, pilot study). The small sample size of the study is due to the fact that the problem stated in our research relates to the intimate-personal sphere, which not every respondent is ready to disclose. In addition, state institutions direct efforts to combat the childfree subculture at the legislative level. All of this collectively reduces the "talkativeness" and motivation to participate in the study.

Research methodology

Morphological Test of Life Values by V.F. Sopov and L.V. Karpushina (diagnostics of personal life values); Schwartz Value Survey; WAM Questionnaire (wellbeing, activity, mood); author's questionnaire (gender, age, profession, income level, presence of children, education level, position on childfree); mathematical-statistical method - Kruskal-Wallis test.

Research hypothesis

Individuals who take a conscious position of refusing childbearing have individual psychological characteristics in the sphere of value orientations and have differences in mental state (mood, wellbeing, activity).

RESULTS

In the conditions of conducting research on individual psychological and biographical characteristics of persons inclined to refuse childbearing, we consistently applied the following methods: Morphological Test of Life Values by V.F. Sopov and L.V. Karpushina (diagnostics of personal life values); Schwartz Value Survey; WAM Questionnaire (wellbeing, activity, mood); author's questionnaire (gender, age, profession, income level, presence of children, education level, position on childfree); mathematical-statistical method - Kruskal-Wallis test.

Women predominated in our study, as women, according to previous studies, primarily form the backbone of the movement under consideration, creating groups with feminist attitudes. The number of women was 74.3%, while men in the study were 25.7%

Regarding the age characteristics of the sample, it is important to note that the main group of respondents (54.3%) belonged to the 21-25 age group. This age is characterized by maximum readiness to start a family and have a child. At this age, as a rule, the period of intensive learning ends, learning activity ceases to be leading; psychologically, there is a rooting of vital plans; emergence of reflection; professional identification; development of individuality; separation. Of the subjects, 22.9% were under 20 years old and 22.9% were over 25 years old.

The education level was characterized predominantly by higher education (71.4%), secondary education (22.9%), and multiple higher or postgraduate education (5.7%),

By fields of activity, the sample was characterized by the following distribution: 28.6% - work activity, 71.4% - educational activity.

In terms of welfare level, our sample was divided into three groups: no permanent income (37.1%); presence of permanent income (37.1%); and other (temporary income, 25.7%).

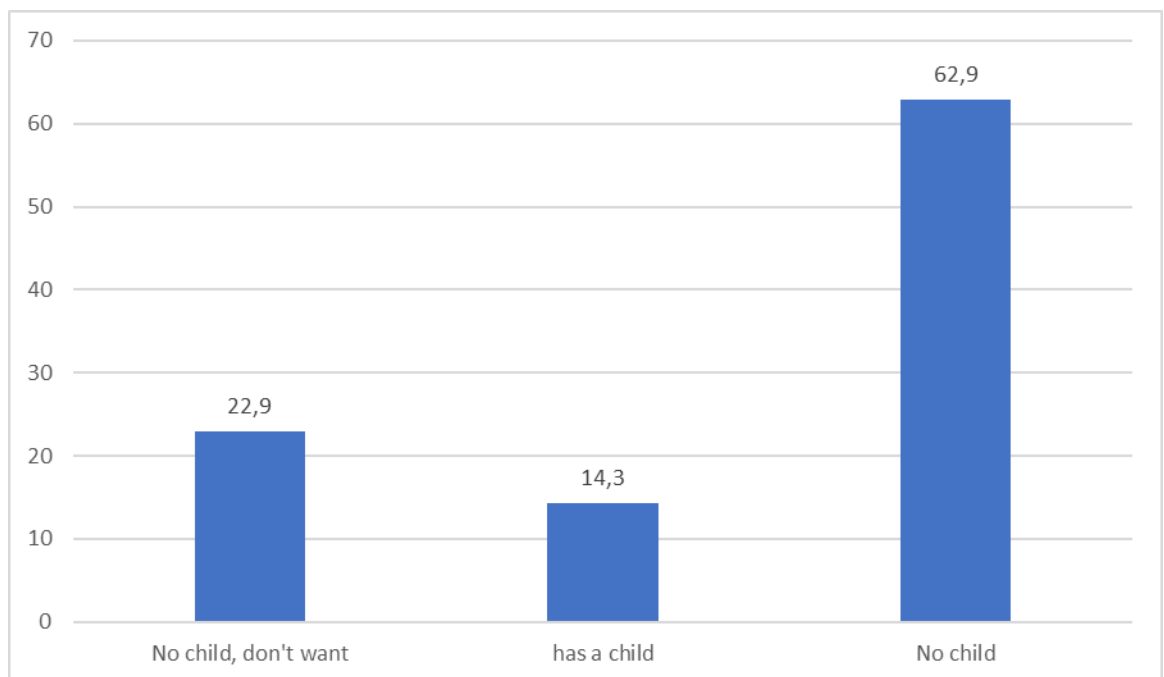


Figure 1. Attitude towards having a child (%)

According to the survey, 22.9% of respondents note the absence of desire to have children in their actual absence; 14.3% note having a child (with the possibility of having more); and 62.9% note the absence of children, but with the vital prospect of their appearance. Thus, a significant part of the respondents from our sample in their existential strategy do not

exclude the appearance of children, which looks optimistic. At the same time, almost 30% of the respondents existentially refuse childbearing (see Fig. 1).

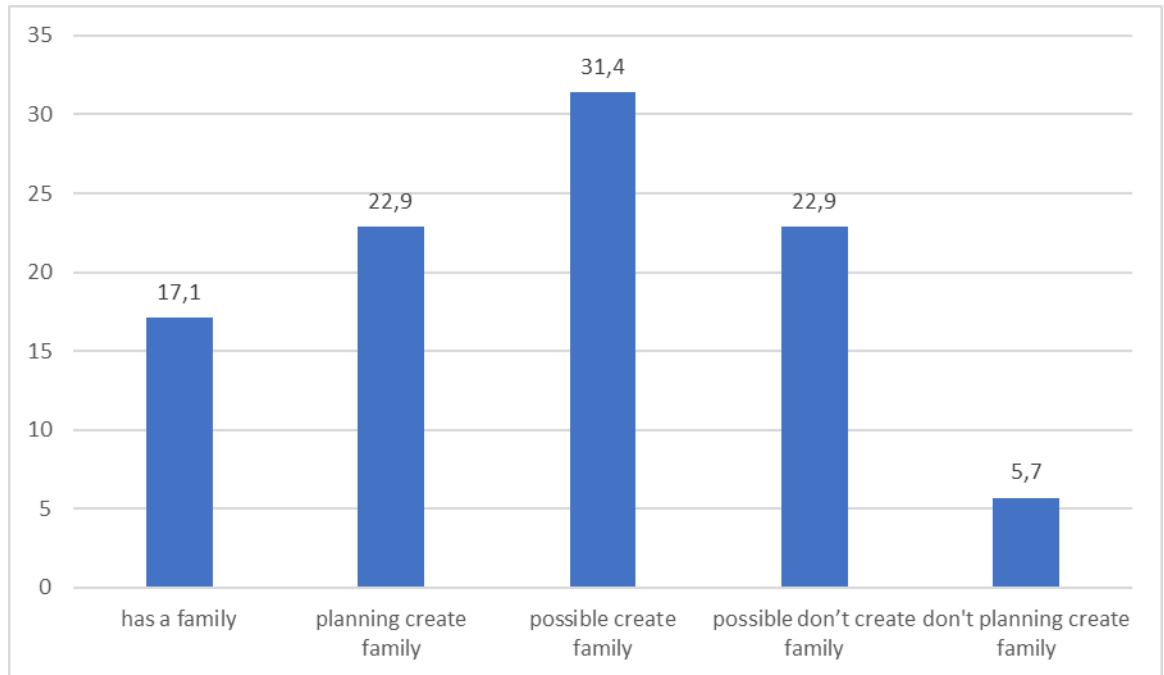


Figure 2. Family planning (%)

The dispersion of opinions on the issue of family creation has the following structure: 17.1% of respondents noted its presence; 22.9% stated a firm position that they plan to create a family; 31.4% tend to create a family; 22.9% consider creating a family an unlikely prospect; 5.7% do not plan to create a family at all. Thus, in aggregate, 28.6% of respondents currently doubt the purpose of a family (see Fig. 2).

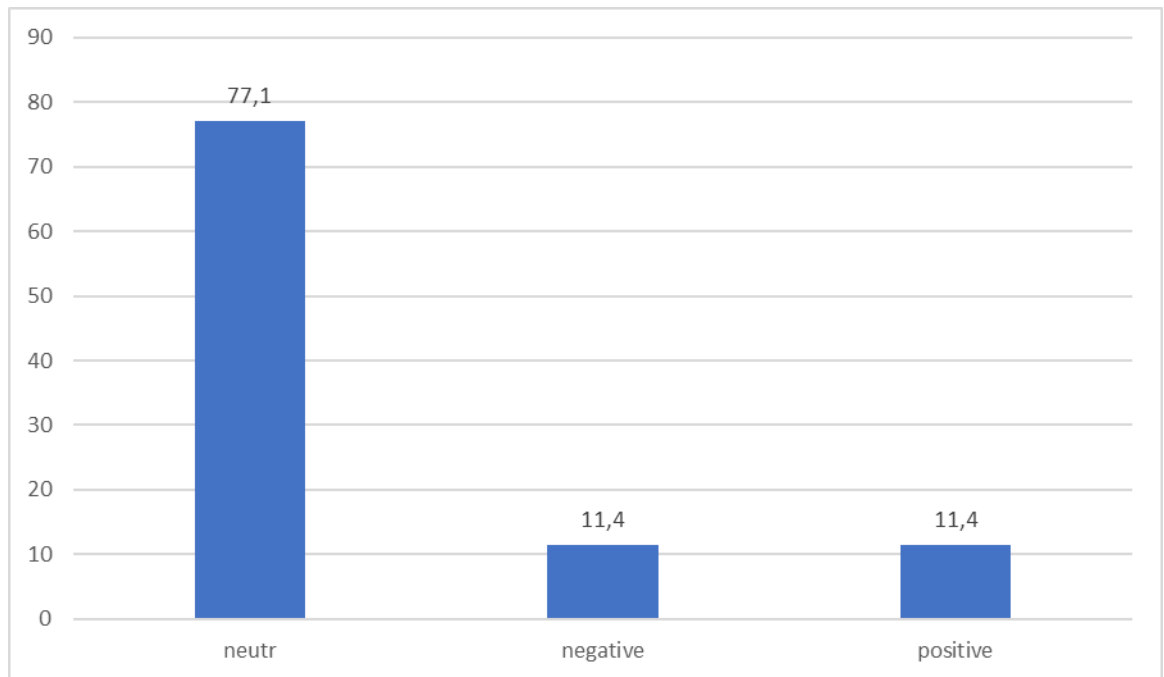


Figure 3. Attitude towards "childfree" (%)

The degree of attitude towards the childfree phenomenon is defined by respondents as neutral (77.1%); negative (11.4%); and positive (11.4%). We can state that in the main mass, respondents take a position of tolerant attitude towards conscious childlessness in our society (see Fig. 3).

DISCUSSION

Comparison groups: 1) no desire to have children - 8 people, 2) raising a child - 5 people, 3) no children yet (desire to have children exists) - 22 people.

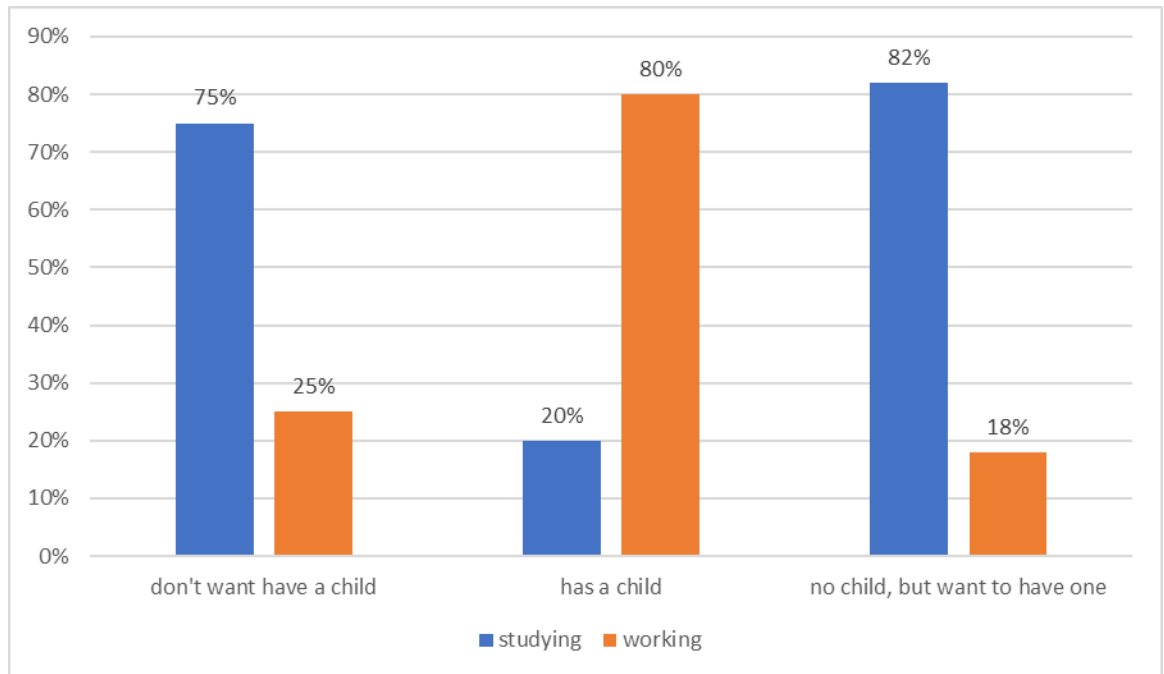


Figure 4. Employment characteristics in comparison groups

According to the comparative analysis of groups with children, temporarily without children, and those who do not want to have children, we obtained the following data: those who do not want to have children are more engaged in educational activities (students, 75%) and only 25% are already engaged in work. In the group where there is already a child (or several children), 80% are engaged in work activities, while in education only 20%. And where there is no child (but there is a desire for childbearing), 82% are distributed in the field of education and 18% in the field of work. This may indicate that work activity as the leading one largely determines the desire and psychological readiness for childbearing. Obviously, the factors of age and income availability are indirectly expressed here (see Fig. 4).

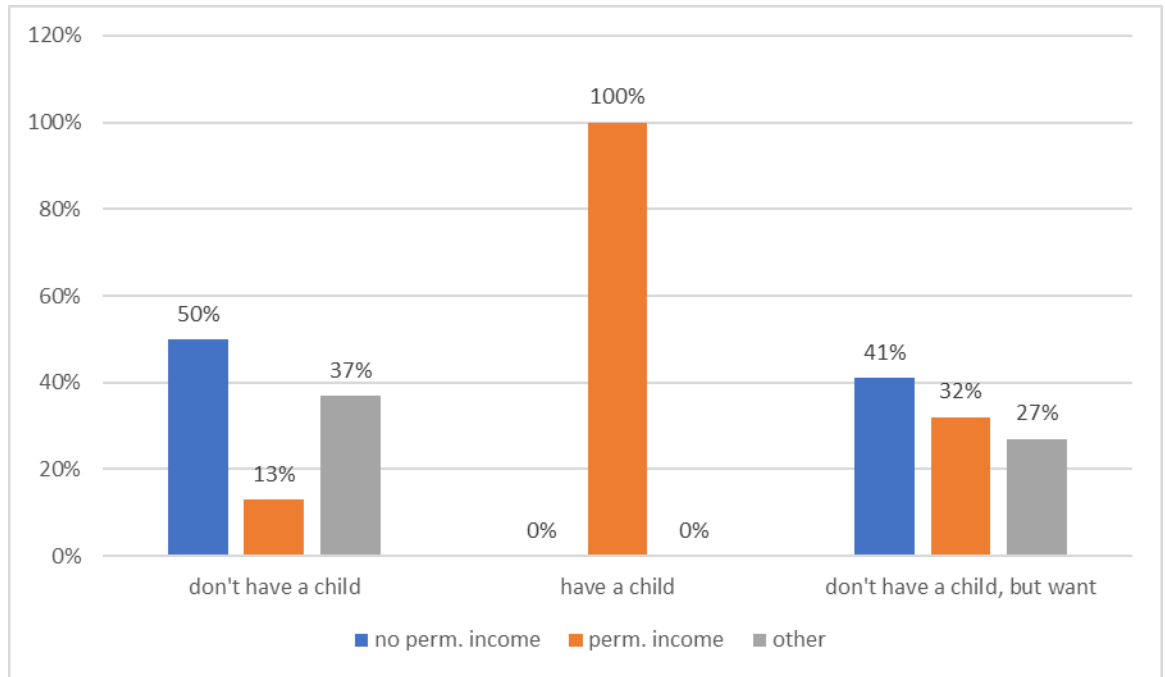


Figure 5. Financial status characteristics in comparison groups

In terms of material income level in the group of respondents who do not wish to have children (childfree), only 13% have a permanent income, which indirectly may indicate a financial antithesis to childbearing. In the group where there is a child, 100% of respondents are employed with a permanent income, and in the group where there is no child (with a desire for childbearing), only 32% have a permanent income. With caution, we can say that the appearance of a permanent income may be a predictor of the emergence of financial confidence and desire for childbearing (see Fig. 5).

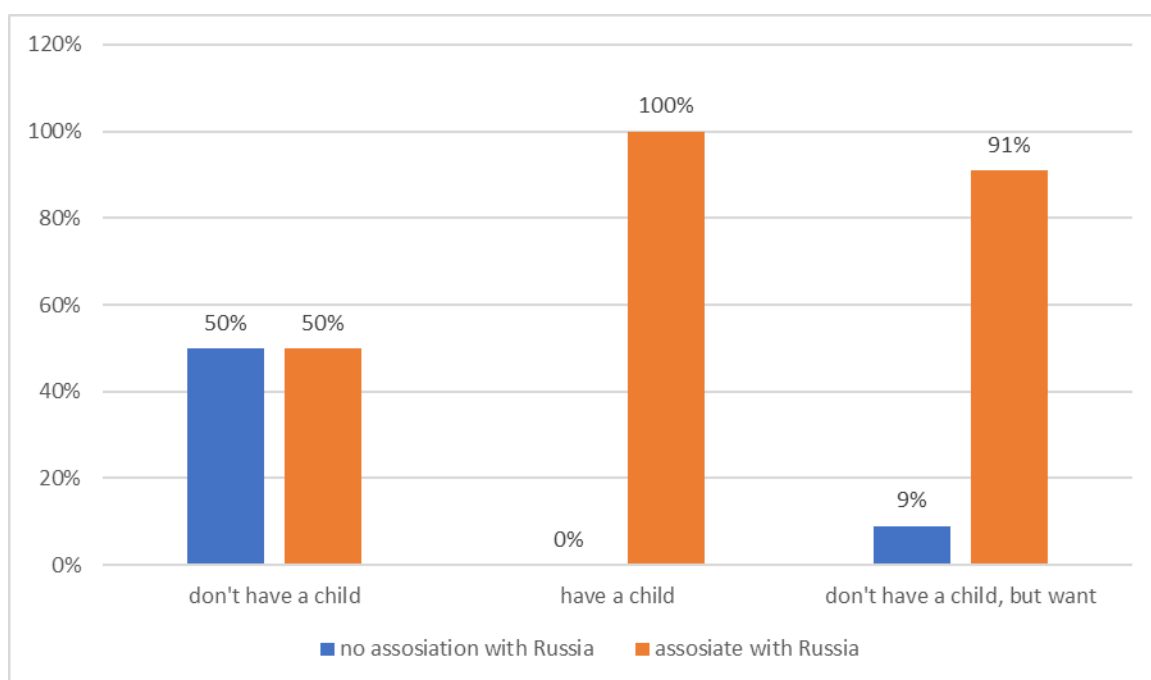


Figure 6. Characteristics of connection with the Homeland in comparison groups

In Figure 12, we can observe a tendency that in the group of subjects who associate their life with Russia, there are children; in the group where there is no child (but this is not associated with a conscious refusal), only 9% do not associate their life with Russia; and in the group where subjects consciously refuse parenthood, 50% do not associate their future life with Russia. This may indicate that the phenomenon of parenthood is also associated with love for the Homeland, with a sense of patriotism, with some degree of socio-psychological settledness (see Fig. 6).

As can be seen, in the group of subjects who are raising a child, the values of wellbeing-activity-mood are higher (Table 1), with the first two indicators showing statistically significant differences between the three groups.

Table 1: Research results

Scales of methods	Research status (average rank in contrast groups))			Kruskal-Wallis test (H)	p-level (n=35 чел.)
	Don't want to have child	Have a child	No child		
WAM					
Wellbeing	10,19	23,30	19,64	6,56	<0,05
Activity	7,81	26,50	19,77	12,06	<0,01
Mood	11,38	22,10	19,48	4,61	-
MLTV					

Spiritual satisfaction	18,94	14,50	18,45	0,73	-
Social contacts	20,19	20,60	16,61	1,11	-
Own prestige	20,69	19,30	16,73	1,00	-
Material position	18,06	21,50	17,18	0,74	-
Preserving individuality	22,50	17,30	16,52	2,05	-
Education	21,63	20,40	16,14	2,07	-
Family life	18,31	13,90	18,82	0,97	-
PVQ-RR					
Hedonism	18,88	10,90	19,30	2,90	-

Thus, the wellbeing index of subjects with children is more positive. They also better maintain vitally important connections with the environment, they have higher activity in the group, degree of temperament manifestation, which is determined by the intensity and volume of human interaction with the social environment and is expressed in activity, initiative, and impetuosity in relation to the group of subjects who consciously refused parenthood, where inertia and passivity are more pronounced. Also, in the first group, such identifiable states as enthusiasm, joy, and delight are more common.

The results of the study also showed (Table 1) that among the subjects who took the "childfree" position, life values prevail that emphasize the importance of their own opinions, views, and beliefs over generally accepted ones, characterizing the personality as independent and unique. For subjects who are raising a child, the most significant were the needs associated with the development of social interaction skills and active socialization. The last comparison group (subjects without children, but with the prospect of their appearance in personal life) chose as most important those values that are guidelines for moral behavior and reveal the priority of spiritual needs over material ones.

The research data showed that subjects who are already raising children are less concerned with issues of personal pleasure and enjoyment of life (Table 1). This, in our opinion, is primarily related to the fact that such subjects are less selfish, with less pronounced narcissistic orientation, their focus of attention is directed to the needs of children, care for them.

In addition, our empirical results, together with the theoretical analysis of literature, demonstrate that such categories as selfishness, narcissism, hedonism, and the pursuit of personal pleasures do not appear organically. They are popularized, introduced into the consciousness of young people by various techniques, special technologies that act imperceptibly and form a disguised desire to lead a childless life, pushing towards it. At the same time, such a tendency developed gradually under the influence of socio-economic and

geopolitical attitudes, interests of economically dominant classes, and financial beneficiaries. Sophisticated technologies of influence allow cultivating necessary attitudes and beliefs. It can be said that young people are drawn into a "demographic flashmob" through psychotechnologies, where the main pattern is the refusal to continue the race. A fashionable trend towards childlessness is being created, the allegedly emergence of a "new society with a new normality" is being stated, where there is no place for a child. In conclusion, we would like to note that from our point of view, the ideology of childlessness is predetermined by a personality profile, which is formed to a greater extent socially: through manipulations, attitudes, aggressive position, etc.

The conduct of the study was complicated by the negative attitude of some subjects to the content of the questions, the unwillingness to answer some of them, which led to the devalidation of individual questionnaires. Our conclusions are certainly limited by the sample of subjects and are a direction for further study of the problem under consideration.

In general, it is important to identify some of the limitations associated with conducting the study. This is a pilot study based on a small sample. Our preliminary study, which is conducted before the main one on a smaller sample, is due to the need for «scientific intelligence» for the upcoming broader study of this problem.

The small sample size in the «contrasting groups» is explained by the respondents' social biases and lack of goodwill to conduct the experiment. In our subsequent research, we will take into account the «legendary» factor of the survey. The present study shows the vector of further investigation of the problem.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The degree of readiness to create a family is distributed as follows: 17.1% of respondents noted the presence of a family; 22.9% stated a firm position that they plan to create a family; 31.4% tend to create a family; 22.9% consider the creation of a family an unlikely prospect; 5.7% do not plan to create a family at all.
2. The degree of attitude towards the childfree phenomenon is defined by respondents as neutral (77.1%); negative (11.4%); and positive (11.4%). We can state that in general, respondents take a position of tolerant attitude towards conscious childlessness in our society.
3. Persons refusing children are more involved in the educational sphere (75%). Among those who do not want to have children, only 13% have a permanent income. Also among them, half (50%) do not associate their lives with Russia and dream of emigration.

4. Subjects who are raising a child have higher values of wellbeing-activity-mood, with the first two indicators showing statistically significant differences between the three groups ($H=6,56$, $p<0,05$; $H=12,06$, $p<0,01$, Table 1).
5. Personal opinion, views, and beliefs are prioritized over generally accepted ones among supporters of «childfree» in relation to those who raise a child and are not supporters of "childfree". For subjects who are raising a child, social interactions with the possibility of forming their social status are an important aspect in the need-emotional sphere.

Research Statement

Conflict of Interest: The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest for the study.

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