

# The childless by choice in perception of young adults

## Abstrakt

*Zamierzona bezdzietność coraz częściej zajmuje uwagę badaczy różnych dyscyplin naukowych (m.in. Callan 1983, Kalus 2002, Mynarska 2009, 2011, Slany 2002). Jest to temat podejmowany w badaniach z różnych ujęć: demograficznego, socjologicznego, ekonomicznego, psychologicznego. Niniejsza praca poświęcona jest prezentacji wyników badań własnych, które miały na celu odpowiedź na pytanie: jak postrzegane są pary zamierzenie bezdzietne? Badania zostały przeprowadzone na grupie 186 młodych dorosłych, za pomocą metody scenariuszowej opracowanej w oparciu o metodę autorstwa Lampman i Dowling-Guyer użytą do badań na Uniwersytecie Alaski (Lampman, Dowling-Guyer, 1995). Otrzymane wyniki potwierdzają, że posiadanie potomstwa istotnie różnicuje postrzeganie par małżeńskich. Osoby zamierzenie bezdzietne uważane są za mniej pracowite, mniej troskliwe i czule zarówno od rodziców, jak i osób nieplodnych, a także za mniej dojrzałe emocjonalnie od par posiadających dzieci.*

## Słowa kluczowe:

*rodzicielstwo; zamierzona bezdzietność; wczesna dorosłość.*

## Abstract

*Voluntary childlessness is getting increasingly more attention of researchers of different disciplines (e.g. Callan 1983, Kalus 2002, Mynarska 2009, 2011, Slany 2002). This is a topic taken up in studies of different perspectives: demographic, sociological, economic and psychological. This paper is devoted to presenting the results of own research, which were aimed at seeking answers to the question: how are voluntarily childless couples perceived? The research was conducted on a group of 186 young adults, using the scenario method developed basing on the method by C. Lampman and Dowling-Guyer used in studies at the*

*University of Alaska (Lampman, Dowling-Guyer, 1995). The results obtained confirm that the fact of having children significantly differentiates the perception of married couples. Voluntarily childless people are considered less diligent, less caring and sensitive both in respect to parents and infertile couples, and less mature emotionally than parents.*

## **Keywords:**

*parenting, voluntary childlessness, early adulthood.*

## **1. Introduction**

Recent decades is a time of intense changes which covered many aspects of life. For a modern man there are many possible scenarios to choose from, not only when it comes to the area of one's career, but more over social and personal areas. Researchers show that young people increasingly turn to alternative forms of marriage and family life (cohabitation, LAT, DINKS, see: Rostowski 2009, Szlendak 2012, CBOS 2013b), and parenthood is no longer seen as a "necessity" (Giddens 1991, Slany 2002). Although the family is still regarded by young people as the highest value (Plopa 2005) the importance of having children has changed (van de Kaa 2002). Young adults are more often deciding for childlessness. It's not a new aspect, but over the past few years, it has been called 'the new phenomenon' (Slany, Szczepaniak-Wiecha 2003).

Since procreation behaviors have always been under strong social influence (Jaguś 2005) the subject of this article is voluntary childlessness in terms of social attitude. It presents results of research conducted over young adults in search for an answer to a stated question: how are voluntarily childless people perceived? Does the perception of such people differ from the perception of couples that have babies, and also couples that are childless but unintentionally?

## **2. Voluntary childlessness**

Demographers are putting more and more focus on decreasing fertility rates. It concerns not only Europe, but also Poland, or maybe even especially Poland, as the fertility rate in 2011 was 1,3 and was one of the lowest in Europe (lower values were shown only in Hungary and Romania, see CBOS 2013a). Tendencies observed for around twenty years result in change of the demographic structure

of the country and impossibility of replacement of generations. Postponing parenthood, or its renouncement, is one of the main reasons of such a situation. In spite of most recent research showing that most women plan to have babies in early adulthood, the quotient of declared childlessness is increasing and it increases in respect to the age range of surveyed women, and so in the range 18–24 it is 12%, in the range 25–29 it is rising to 30%, the range 30–34 boosts it up to 48% to reach 75% in the range of 35–39 years of age (see CBOS, 2013a).

Voluntary childlessness understood as “lack of offspring in relationship between a woman and a man, being a result of intentional choice of such a lifestyle, without additional outside factors (infertility) preventing conception of a baby” (Jarmołowska 2009, p. 185). Literature show a couple of terms for that phenomenon. In opposition to each other function two terms of ‘childless’ and ‘childfree’, stressing the positive side of such phenomenon and that it is a choice, not a necessity. Estimates give that around ⅓ of decisions about childless lifestyle is made early, even earlier than decision about marriage (Kalus 2002).

The increasing range of voluntary childlessness connects to the coexistence of a couple of factors that are divided into two groups – factors connected with the social context and factors referring directly to the decision maker (Garnca-rek 2008,2010, Kocik 2002, Mynarska 2009, 2011, Slany and Szczepaniak-Wiecha 2003). The first group contains: bad financial situation, difficulties in the labor market, lack of adequate housing, family policy of the country, an increase of individualistic attitudes, changes in a family structure and value of a child in the family, the influence of western styles of behavior patterns. According to CBOS, for half of women not planning to have children the reason for such a decision is bad financial situation, and for one third of them it is the expected problems of connecting family and professional responsibilities (CBOS, 2013a). Regarding the factors connected to the person himself/herself: partner’s attitude, lack of support from the nearest environment, maturity, experience gained from the family home (Bartak and Bartosz 2010, Rojewska 2010).

A factor that also affects the development of childbearing decisions is the attitude towards childlessness and childless lifestyle (Liefbroer 2005). It may happen on two levels: on the one hand: “attitudes influence behavioral intentions, which precede and determine actual behaviors” and on the other “norms about the social acceptance of childlessness shape the context in which childbearing decisions are made and may thus influence fertility rates” (Merz, Liefbroer 2012, p. 587–588).

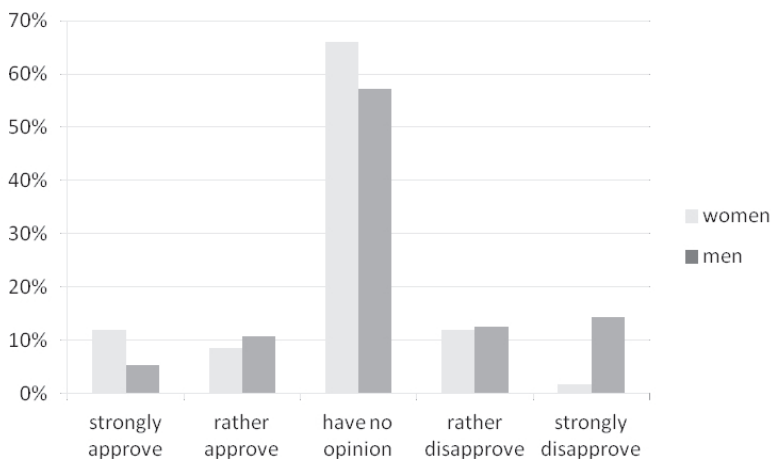
## Attitudes towards voluntary childlessness

Parenting or its lack is not neutral in the assessment of social care. But attitudes towards it are not clear (Szymanska 2013). On one hand, particularly to married couples, it is expected to have children, or at least to have a desire of having offspring (Miall 1986), as we can read: “infertility is a sign of abnormality, so it is potentially stigmatized” (Przybył 2003, p. 53). On the other hand, there is more and more talk about social changes, which allowed taking off the stigmatizing nature from the image of childlessness (Slany 2002).

Interesting data can be found in the analysis of Merz and Liefbroer based on the European Social Survey (“repeated cross-sectional survey conducted in large majority of European countries, focusing on social attitudes and values, using face-to-face interviews”, quoted Merz, Liefbroer 2012, p. 591) According to the authors of the analysis, the level of acceptance of the decision about childlessness depends largely on the attachment to traditional values in society (Merz, Liefbroer 2012). The results were collected also in Poland and indicate that in our country approximately 50% of people admit to disapproval of the decision of voluntary childlessness. In countries such as Scandinavian countries, where among social values prevails individualism, emancipation and modernity, the level of acceptance of the resignation of offsprings is much greater (Merz and Liefbroer 2012). Researchers point to a relationship between measured attitude, and variables such as: the already mentioned conservative and traditional values, educational level, religion, socioeconomic status, gender. The most favourable towards resignation of parenthood are young highly educated people, especially women. Our study conducted among students of Wroclaw University of Technology shows that although the percentage of people actually unfavorable towards childlessness is not as high as the mentioned one obtained for Poland by the mentioned authors, but the number of people affirming the childless lifestyle is not too big, either (20%)<sup>1</sup>. The results obtained are illustrated in Picture 1.

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<sup>1</sup> Surveys were carried out on a small group of 232 people, also among students of one university which may have influenced the results, but were part of pilot studies preceding the larger project related to the study of attitudes of young adults towards the voluntary childlessness and were treated as indicators of certain trends.



Picture 1. How much do you approve/disapprove when couples choose never to have children? N=232. Source: own research.

Declared acceptance is only one possible way to study attitudes towards the discussed phenomenon. Much more interesting results are provided by a research on how this attitude is expressed in the perception of the childless by choice in society (the experimental part of this article will refer to this approach). A study conducted twice over the sixties of the twentieth century in the United States indicated the same results – childless women were seen as childish, neurotic, selfish and of poor health (Basten 2009). Regardless of changes which have occurred during this time in the American society, similar results were obtained in regard to childless couples which were attributed to such features as: selfish attitude to life, focus on career, materialistic, selfishness, loneliness, mental immaturity (Miall 1986; Veevers 1980). And people choosing childlessness were described as lazy, dishonest, irresponsible, isolated, maladjusted (Veevers 1979).

These results are reflected in the analysis of internet forums gathering people childless by choice (Garncarek 2010). The voluntarily childless turn one's attention to different treatment of their group by society, admitting that they are recognized by the environment as misfits, are often faced with derogatory terms about themselves and their intolerance of individual decisions (Garncarek, 2010, p. 213). On internet forums gathering voluntarily childless people, one can find entries like: "The classic approach to the childless by choice in our society are: eccentric, crazy, sick, insane, selfish, careerist, etc." (quoted Garncarek 2010, p. 213).

How does this relate to the previously mentioned studies that show an increase in acceptance of childless couples? How are people voluntarily giving up parenting seen? Does the public perception of these people differ from the per-

ception of people with children? The author of this article seeks to find answers to these, and the results discussed below are part of the results obtained in the broader research project devoted to the issue of attitudes of young adults towards voluntary childlessness.

### 3. Research

The aim of this experiment was to seek an answer to the following questions:

- How are voluntary childless people seen?
- Are the voluntarily childless marriages regarded differently than parents or involuntarily childless marriages?
- Is there an interaction between child status and professional status which would affected the attitudes towards childless people?

### 4. Method and experimental group

In this study the method based on the research of Claudia Lampman and Sena Dowling-Guyer (Lampman, Dowling-Guyer, 1995) was used (after receiving authors' permission).

The research is based on scenario method. It includes six versions of the same short story describing the marriage of Agnieszka and Jarek. They differ only in terms of a child status and a professional status (independent variables). And so on, a couple is described as infertile ("like to have children very much but cannot have them"), voluntarily childless ("do not have and do not plan to have children"), or having children ("they have two children"), and each of these three versions has two variants, differing them because of the professional status of the spouses: high (computer scientist and architect) and low (an auto mechanic and a beautician).

The subject's task was to rate each spouse on nineteen characteristics. Each dimension construction was based on the semantic differential, for example ambitious – unambitious, sensitive – insensitive<sup>2</sup>. They form three scales: Drive, Caring and Emotional Health<sup>3</sup>. Drive scale was formed by responses to seven items

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<sup>2</sup> In the original study made, there were twenty-six items, but in the pilot studies for this research in Polish translation, in the factor analysis nineteen of them were selected.

<sup>3</sup> In the original study, there was also an additional scale on which subjects rated the strength and quality of the relationship. However, in this research, the results obtained in this scale weren't statistically significant. Trends were noticeable only, which could be due to too small sample of re-

(for example ambitious, competent, determined), Caring scale by six items (for example loving, caring, sensitive), and Emotional Health (for example: lonely, stressed, anxious) by four items. These scales have obtained satisfactory results accuracy, comparable with the results obtained in American studies. Detailed internal consistency of each scale is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Internal consistency of scales.

Cronbach's Alpha		
Scale	He	She
Drive	0,79	0,88
Caring	0,88	0,882
Emotional Health	0,588	0,65

The studies involved 186 people aged 25 to 34. Respondents were PhD students. Group selection was intentional, because according to prior research this group is considered to be most favorable toward resignation of parenthood (Merz, Liefbroer, 2012). However in further studies this group should be extend and the results obtained in the different subgroups should be compared. Because now it is not possible to generalize these findings beyond university students.

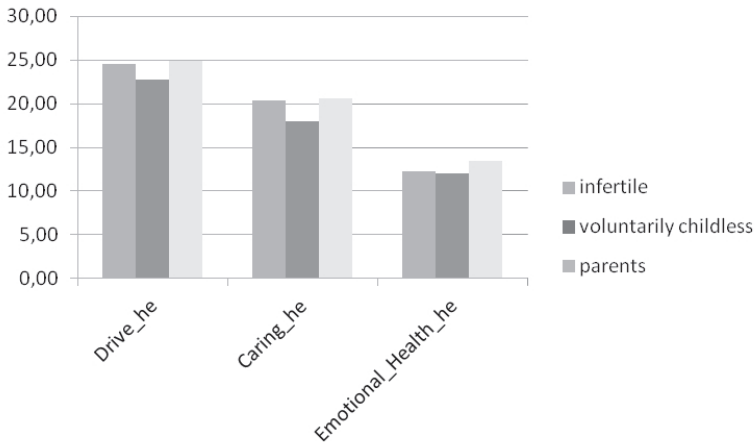
## 5. Results

The collected data were analyzed using series of analysis of variance with interactions. The study confirmed that the voluntarily childless are perceived significantly different from those of infertile and having children. The results confirmed a relationship between the results obtained on the scales, child status, and professional status. They did not, however, confirm the existence of the interaction between having children and a professional status. Therefore, for the purposes of this study there are discussed only the results obtained on child status.

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spondents. Therefore, it was decided not to include the analysis of the results obtained in this scale to the article. However, it will be an interesting starting point for further research.

### 5.1. Results for Jarek.



Picture 2. Results obtained for Jarek on three scales: Drive, Caring and Emotional Health.

#### 5.1.1. Drive Scale

Having children significantly differentiates the results for Jarek on the Drive scale ( $F=4,096$   $p<0,18$ ).

Table 2. Test of Between-Subjects effects on Drive Scale for Jarek.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Children	154,350	2	77,175	4,096	,018
Professional Status	477,543	1	477,543	25,346	,000
Children * Professional Status	18,468	2	9,234	,490	,613

Scheffe's *post hoc* test showed significant differences between the childless and fathers. Furthermore, a less conservative LSD test has also confirmed the significant difference between the group of the childless and the group of the infertile. Detailed distribution is presented in Table 3.



Table 3. Post hoc tests for Jarek on Drive scale.

	(I) Children	(J) Children	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard error	Sig
Scheffe's Test	infertile	voluntarily childless	1,8100	,78607	,073
		parents	-,2762	,77349	,938
	voluntarily childless	infertile	-1,8100	,78607	,073
		parents	-2,0862*	,78001	,030
	parents	infertile	,2762	,77349	,938
		voluntarily childless	2,0862*	,78001	,030
LSD Test	infertile	voluntarily childless	1,8100*	,78607	,022
		parents	-,2762	,77349	,721
	voluntarily childless	infertile	-1,8100*	,78607	,022
		parents	-2,0862*	,78001	,008
	parents	infertile	,2762	,77349	,721
		voluntarily childless	2,0862*	,78001	,008

As a voluntarily childless man Jarek scored significantly lower results on the Drive scale ( $M=22,78$ ) than as involuntarily childless ( $M=24,59$ ) or as a father ( $M=24,869$ ).

### 5.1.2. Caring Scale

The obtained results confirmed that having children significantly differentiates the results on the Caring Scale for Jarek ( $F=9,382$   $p<0,000$ ).

Table 4. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Jarek on Caring scale.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Children	246,335	2	123,167	9,382	,000
Professional Status	93,513	1	93,513	7,123	,008
Children * Professional Status	11,056	2	5,528	,421	,657

Jarek presented as voluntarily childless obtained results significantly lower ( $M=17,97$ ) than the results in the other two variants – either infertile ( $M=20,37$ ) or fathers ( $M=20,58$ ). Detailed distribution is presented in Table 5.

Table 5. *Post hoc* test for Jarek on Caring scale.

	(I) Children	(J) Children	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard error	Sig
Scheffe's Test	infertile	voluntarily childless	2,3954*	,65616	,002
		parents	-,2104	,64565	,948
	voluntarily childless	infertile	-2,3954*	,65616	,002
		parents	-2,6058*	,65109	,000
	parents	infertile	,2104	,64565	,948
		voluntarily childless	2,6058*	,65109	,000

### 5.1.3. Emotional Health

The fact of having children significantly differentiates the results obtained for Jarek on the scale of Emotional Health ( $F = 5.080, p < 0.007$ ).

Table 6. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Jarek on Emotional Health scale.

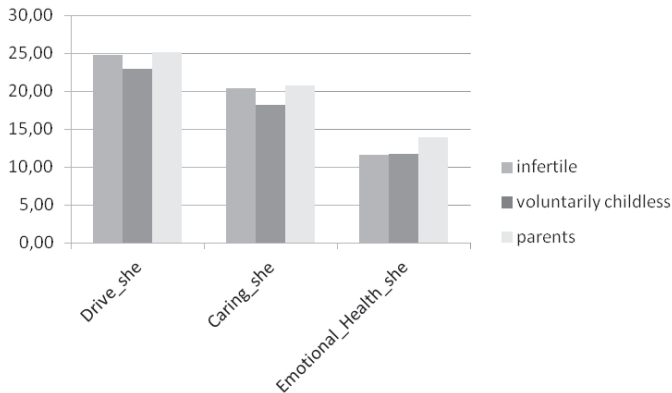
Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Children	217,525	2	108,762	17,263	,000
Professional Status	6,509	1	6,509	1,033	,311
Children * Professional Status	3,676	2	1,838	,292	,747

Scheffe's *post hoc* test showed that as a voluntary childless man Jarek received significantly lower scores ( $M = 12,067$ ) only than fathers ( $M = 13,50$ ). The results obtained for fathers found to be significantly higher than both the results of the childless and infertile. Detailed distribution is presented in Table 7.

Table 7. Post hoc test for Jarek on Emotional Health scale.

	(I) Children	(J) Children	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard error	Sig
Scheffe's Test	infertile	voluntarily childless	,2075	,47568	,909
		parents	-1,2292*	,46807	,034
	voluntarily childless	infertile	-,2075	,47568	,909
		parents	-1,4367*	,47201	,011
	parents	infertile	1,2292*	,46807	,034
		voluntarily childless	1,4367*	,47201	,011

### 5.2. Results for Agnieszka.



Picture 3. Results obtained for Agnieszka on three scales: Drive, Caring and Emotional Health.

#### 5.2.1. Drive Scale

Having children significantly differentiates the results for Agnieszka on the Drive scale ( $F = 4.050, p < 0.019$ ).

Table 8. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Agnieszka on Drive scale.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Children	159,715	2	79,858	4,050	,019

Professional Status	358,443	1	358,443	18,176	,000
Children * Professional Status	24,268	2	12,134	,615	,542

Agnieszka was rated as significantly less driven when presented as voluntarily childless ( $M= 22,95$ ) than when portrayed as a mother ( $M=25,126$ ). And also (the analysis of the LSD test) when described as infertile ( $M= 24,725$ ). Detailed distribution is presented in Table 9.

Table 9. *Post hoc* test for Agnieszka on Drive scale.

	(I) Children	(J) Children	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard error	Sig
Scheffe's Test	infertile	voluntarily childless	1,7753	,80420	,090
		parents	-,4010	,79133	,880
	voluntarily childless	infertile	-1,7753	,80420	,090
		parents	-2,1763*	,79800	,026
	parents	infertile	,4010	,79133	,880
		voluntarily childless	2,1763*	,79800	,026
LSD Test	infertile	voluntarily childless	1,7753*	,80420	,029
		parents	-,4010	,79133	,613
	voluntarily childless	infertile	-1,7753*	,80420	,029
		parents	-2,1763*	,79800	,007
	parents	infertile	,4010	,79133	,613
		voluntarily childless	2,1763*	,79800	,007

### 5.2.2. Caring Scale

The result analogous to Jarek's was obtained on the Caring scale for Agnieszka.

Table 10. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Agnieszka on Caring scale.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Children	240,111	2	120,055	8,966	,000
Professional Status	114,596	1	114,596	8,558	,004
Children * Professional Status	3,983	2	1,991	,149	,862

Described as intentionally childless obtained results significantly lower ( $M=18,17$ ) than presented as involuntarily childless ( $M=20,439$ ) or having children ( $M=20,766$ ). Detailed distribution is presented in Table 11.

Table 11. *Post hoc* test for Agnieszka on Caring scale.

	(I) Children	(J) Children	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard error	Sig.
Scheffe's Test	infertile	voluntarily childless	2,2664*	,66268	,003
		parents	-,3261	,65207	,883
	voluntarily childless	infertile	-2,2664*	,66268	,003
		parents	-2,5926*	,65757	,001
	parents	infertile	,3261	,65207	,883
		voluntarily childless	2,5926*	,65757	,001

### 5.2.3. Emotional Health Scale

The fact of having children significantly differentiates the results obtained on the scale of Emotional Health for Agnieszka ( $F = 17.263$   $p < 0.000$ ).

Table 12. Tests of Between-Subjects Effects for Agnieszka on Emotional Health scale.

Source	Type III Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Children	217,525	2	108,762	17,263	,000
Professional Status	6,509	1	6,509	1,033	,311
Children * Professional Status	3,676	2	1,838	,292	,747

Agnieszka described as not planning to have children was rated significantly lower ( $M=11,68$ ) than mothers ( $M=13,89$ ), but mothers obtained results significantly higher not only than childless but infertile as well ( $M=11,548$ ). Detailed distribution of analysis in Scheffe's *post hoc* test in Table 13.

Table 13. *Post hoc* test for Agnieszka on Emotional Health scale.

	(I) Children	(J) Children	Mean Difference (I-J)	Standard error	Sig
Scheffe's Test	infertile	voluntarily childless	-,1350	,45456	,957
		parents	-2,3423*	,44728	,000
	voluntarily childless	infertile	,1350	,45456	,957
		parents	-2,2073*	,45105	,000
	parents	infertile	2,3423*	,44728	,000
		voluntarily childless	2,2073*	,45105	,000

## 6. Discussion

Each family lives in social environment. Social norms and attitudes affect the life of every couple. Especially having or not having children is not socially indifferent. That is why it is good to know and understand what the perception of couples depending on child status is. The results obtained in this research confirm the data collected from the literature on the subject (presented in earlier parts of this article) that family status may affect attitudes towards married couples. And voluntary childlessness may be seen as “deviant behavior”, which violates the unwritten social norms (Callan 1983, p. 262).

Research participants who read stories about a couple childless by choice rated the man as less driven and caring than a spouse in involuntarily childless marriage or marriage with children. The same results were obtained for a female member of a couple. Furthermore, both voluntarily childless men and women were seen as less emotionally healthy than those who have children. It is worth noting, however, that the parents were rated on the scale of emotional health significantly above both voluntarily and involuntarily childless spouses. Which confirms that not only voluntary childlessness, but childlessness in general, may be a discrediting attribute for couples (see Miall 1986, Przybył 2003).

However, as it was mentioned, the voluntary childless were evaluated significantly lower than the infertile on two scales: Drive and Caring. It seems to be associated with the distinction that it is not so much the lack of children itself, but unwillingness to have them that play a significant role, because as we can read: “the deviance of the voluntarily childless lies not only in the fact that they

do not have children, but primarily, and especially, for women, in the fact that they do not want them” (Park 2002, p. 22).

In these considerations, particularly noteworthy is the fact that people without children are rated as less driven than parents or the involuntarily childless, which would indicate a perception of them as less diligent. Although childlessness is often reasoned by putting work and career over the family, and greater preoccupation with professional development. These results could explain the perception of parenting as “working full time” and waiving having children, as motivated by laziness and easiness (see Veevers 1979). But there was found no interaction between family constellation and professional status that could influence the attitudes.

In further research it would be worthy to extend the study group beyond student participants and beyond young adults. It would also be interesting to extend using tool, so it let examine the perception of childless people divided into subgroups: single, in formal or informal relationships.

The subject of these research seems important not only because of practical reference – because “understanding potential reactions to childlessness is essential for health care providers and counselors helping” in their work with couples (Lampman, Dowling–Guyer, 1995, p. 221), but also because attitudes towards these choices may determine individual fertility decisions. And that is especially important in early adulthood, when these decisions are made.

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