

## STEREOTYPES TOWARD VOLUNTARILY CHILDLESS PEOPLE

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### Abstract

Research shows that people are perceived differently according to their parenting status. In particular, people who are voluntarily childless people are perceived more negatively than parents or people who are involuntarily childless people. Based on this information, the present research aims to examine how women and men who are voluntarily childless people are perceived in Turkey, a culture that cares about children. In this study, the participants (N = 35; mean age = 28.34) were asked to write down "the adjectives that come to mind when they think of women and men who do not want to have children". Participants were reached through an online data website <http://www.surveey.com>. Next, participants' responses were categorized using thematic analysis: personality traits (positive and negative), independence, and anxiety. According to the themes, men who were voluntarily childless were stereotyped more negatively than women who were voluntarily childless. Positive personality traits included realistic and hardworking (e.g., career-wise, workaholic, and hardworking) for both women and men, but women were also perceived as sociable and confident (e.g., successful, strong). Negative personal traits indicated that both groups were perceived as irresponsible and egoistic. However, men were also perceived as immature and womanizers (e.g., casanova, playboy). In addition, anxiety was a prominent theme for both groups. However, in this theme, while the emphasis was on the material things of men, the pregnancy period and body deterioration were emphasized in women.

**Keywords:** *Stereotypes, parental status, voluntarily childless.*

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### 1. Introduction

People generally believe that everyone will get married (DePaulo, 2007; DePaulo & Morris 2005). This belief continues with couples who will have children. People perceive parenthood as a moral imperative (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). But rates show that birth rates are falling (Turkish Statistical Institute, 2020). In the literature, people's unwillingness to be parents have been studied with terms such as "voluntarily childless", "childfree people" (e.g., Bays, 2017; Somers, 1993). These studies show that childfree people are evaluated differently from parents. Thus, this study aims to examine, with a qualitative study, how voluntary childless women and men are perceived in Turkey, where it is important to have children. In addition, whether the voluntary childless people are evaluated differently from the parents is another aim of the study.

Women who are parents were described as concerned, loving, hard-working, conventional, and patient, while childfree women were perceived as nonconforming, self-fulfilled, materialistic, intelligent, and individualistic (Callan, 1983). Childfree people were also perceived as significantly less psychologically fulfilled than parents (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). Bays (2017) stated that mothers were perceived as warmer than competent, and voluntarily childless women were perceived as more competent than warm. In addition, mothers were the most admired group, eliciting helping behaviors; and childfree women elicited envy, disgust, and harmful behaviors. In summary, according to this study emotions, and behaviors toward women vary with parental status. Somers (1993) showed that childfree people were negatively stereotyped by relatives and their friends. According to this study, women were evaluated more negatively than men. Accordingly, voluntarily childfree targets elicited significantly greater moral outrage than did targets with two children (Ashburn-Nardo, 2017). In another study, childfree men were perceived as less caring and driven than involuntarily childless men and fathers, while voluntary childless women were perceived as less driven (Lampman & Dowling-Guyer, 1995).

People may decide not to have children for various reasons. For example, traditional gender roles have negatively correlated to voluntary childlessness (Waren & Pals, 2013). According to Waren and Pals (2013), education has also increased the probability of not having children in women. Other studies have

also shown the relationship between education level and voluntary childlessness. Research on attitudes towards voluntary childlessness in Turkey (Bahtiyar-Saygan & Sakallı-Uğurlu, 2019) showed that higher education predicts more positive attitudes towards childlessness. The study also included younger people who tended to support childlessness choice.

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1. Participants and procedure**

The sample included 35 (24 female, 11 male) participants (age from 18 to 60;  $M = 28.34$ ,  $SD = 7.72$ ). Sixteen participants are not in a relationship, nine participants are married, and ten are in a relationship. Five participants have children. Participants were asked to write down "the adjectives that come to mind when they think of women and men who do not want to have children" and "the adjectives that come to mind when they think of mothers and fathers". Participants reached to research through an online data website <http://www.surveeey.com>. According to Patton (2014), the basic meanings in a text are "theme". The words and themes in the text are analyzed by content analysis. In this study, thematic analysis was performed after the answers were collected. Firstly, all responses were reviewed. Secondly, coding was done. Finally, the codes were included in the appropriate themes.

### **2.2. Voluntarily childness women**

"Free" (frequency 11) was coded most frequently for voluntarily childless women. At the same time, participants have stated that these women are individualistic, irresponsible and career-oriented (frequency 3). All the stereotypes for voluntarily childless women have included three themes: Personal traits, independence, and anxiety.

Personality traits are divided into two sub-themes: negative and positive. The codes included in the negative traits (frequency 15): irresponsible, incompetent, self-centered, arrogant, selfish, coward. The codes included in the positive traits (frequency 34): social, hard-working (career-oriented, workaholic, idealistic), confident (successful, strong), and realistic (logical, realistic, realist).

Independence (12): Freedom (free, independent).

Anxiety (9): anxiety; worries about pregnancy, body deterioration, future, confidence, parenting, weight.

### **2.3. Voluntarily childness men**

Participants rated voluntary childless men with fewer different characteristics than voluntary childless women. Participants stated that these people do not want responsibility (frequency 11). However, these men were considered to be selfish, anxious, and free (frequency 4). All the characteristics for voluntary childless men have included three themes: personal traits, independence, and anxiety.

Personal traits are divided into two sub-themes. Positive traits (frequency 5): realistic (logical, realist), hardworking. Negative traits: (frequency 24): irresponsible, egoistic, womanizer, women-chaser, immature.

Independence (frequency 4): free.

Anxiety (frequency 11): anxiety; worries about materiality, parenting.

### **2.4. Women who are parents**

Responses of the participants were divided into three themes: personal traits, family responsibility, physical appearance

Similar to the previous two groups, the theme of personal traits is divided into two sub-themes as positive and negative. Positive traits codes (frequency 37): responsibility, mature, strong, altruistic, empathetic, compassionate. Negative traits codes (frequency 27): impetuous, authoritarian, anxious, irritable.

Family responsibility (frequency 23): tired, sleepless, always thinking of her child, unhappy, hopeless.

Physical appearance (frequency 6): ugly, neglected.

### **2.5. Men who are parents**

The characteristics for this group are divided into two themes: personal traits vs family responsibility.

Personality traits: Positive personality traits (frequency 19): responsible, compassionate. Negative personality traits (frequency 9): irresponsible, anxious.

Family responsibility (frequency 16): protector, unhappy, inconsiderate, unaimed, tired.

### 3. Discussion

The results showed that people were evaluated according to their parental status. Voluntarily childless women were rated with more positive characteristics than volunteer childless men. Men have more negative traits than women. Similarly, the theme of independence was emphasized more for women. The unexpected result in this study is that childfree women have the positive characteristics than negatives. These results may be related to the young sample of the research. Thus, Bahtiyar-Saygan and Sakallı-Uğurlu (2019) emphasized that young people supported voluntary childlessness more. At the same time, participants are well-educated in this research. Future studies should reach people from different age groups and different education levels. However, the results of this study are consistent with previous studies in terms of education and age (Bahtiyar-Saygan & Sakallı-Uğurlu, 2019; Waren & Pals, 2013). Also, not women, but childfree men have more negative traits than positive traits. The remarkable result here is that men are evaluated as a womanizer. A similar result was obtained in the study of Sakallı-Uğurlu, Türkoğlu, Kuzlak, and Gupta (2018) in which they examined stereotypes against single men and women in Turkey. In other words, single men in Turkey were also perceived as women-chaser. Accordingly, it may be said that men who denied marriage and having children, which are accepted as the norm, are similarly stereotyped.

The results showed that parents have more positive characteristics than negative characteristics. Participants believed that fathers are irresponsible people. As traditional gender roles expect childcare on women, fathers may be thought to be more careless to children. In the theme of family responsibility, “be tired” was emphasized for mothers, while protectionism is emphasized for fathers. This result maybe since the traditional Turkish family structure. According to common belief, men should protect women and be responsible for them (Glick & Fiske, 1996; Sakallı-Uğurlu, 2002).

An important result for parents is that physical appearance is emphasized in mothers' characteristics, but not for fathers. Accordingly, although men do not physically change after having children, the same is not the case for women. Moreover, physical appearance was not emphasized in childfree women. These results may be related to the fact that the participants thought that mothers were tired, sleepless, or constantly spending time with their children.

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