

DIFFERENCES IN PERCEIVED SOCIAL SUPPORT, LIFE SATISFACTION AND PSYCHOLOGICAL WELL-BEING IN PARENTS AND “CHILDFREE” INDIVIDUALS

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Abstract

More and more women and men are postponing the age of childbearing due to lack of stability and changing life preferences. Other people, however, consciously decide not to have children because it is not their desire to have children. The literature recognises this group of people as “*Childfree*” individuals. Several studies have analyzed the influence that some socio-demographic variables such as income, employment status, educational level, etc, have on the decision to become parents. However, few studies have focused on analyzing which psychological variables are involved in this decision. Therefore, the main objective of this study is to analyze the differences in perceived social support, life satisfaction and psychological well-being between those who are parents and those who have made the decision not to become parents (“*Childfree*”). The sample of the study consisted of 145 participants between 25 and 45 years of age ($M = 37,46$, $DT = 4,99$), residents of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country. Of these, 134 were women and the remaining 11 were men. The participants were divided into two groups: those who had children (women = 100, men = 5) and those who were childfree by choice (women = 34, men = 6). The results showed significant differences between groups, where parents obtained a greater satisfaction with life in comparison to *childfree* individuals. In addition, it was also observed that the participants who had children reported higher scores in the dimensions Self-Acceptance, Mastery of the Environment and Purpose in Life, of the psychological well being, than those who were childfree.

Keywords: *Parenthood, perceived social support, life satisfaction, psychological well-being, childfree.*

1. Introduction

Parenthood is one of the most significant and impactful life events for a person, since the person's life changes completely (Taubman-Ben-Ari, 2019). This event causes a significant change of roles and identities in the person's life, as it is an experience of personal growth (Saxbe et al., 2018). Despite this, the desire to reproduce is not always something instinctive, as there are many people who freely make the decision not to have children (Bhambhani and Inbanathan, 2020). This is also an important step since there are people who consider that they will have a fuller life without children and therefore choose not to become parents (Utamidewi et al., 2022).

In relation to someone's decision to become a parent, or not to do so, this may be related to several factors. Parenthood is a vital project for many people, who have an autonomous motivation to have a child and adopt the parental role at their own free will (Gugliandolo et al., 2021). Becoming a parent may also represent for someone the judgment of his or her own life and the conviction that it is his or her duty to procreate as one's social or family purpose (De Roubaix, 2021). Also, taking into account the meaning of religion, Klobučar (2016) states that a child means the continuation of a quality couple relationship.

Despite this, there are also those who for various reasons decide to not have children. Childfree people are those who are not parents simply because they do not desire it. Powell (2020) affirms that having personal freedom is one of the most motivating aspects for remaining childfree. According to Stegen et al. (2021), one of the main profiles of childfree individuals is made up of those who are characterized by not experiencing a sense of longing to be parents and take care of their children. There are also people who throughout their lives voluntarily develop and deeply internalize a series of ideas such as those related to global warming, that later contribute to them being childfree (Burkett, 2021). In any case, there is not a specific response to why do parents and childfree people reach their decision, as there are infinity of reasons for taking both paths.

The social support perceived by a person refers to the subjective assessment that each individual makes about whether the people around them care about them and are willing to provide help (Ciarrochi et al., 2017). Thus, assessing the perceived support, both emotional and material help of others, could be a very relevant factor when making a decision as important as that of becoming a parent or not (Thompson et al., 2015).

Psychological well-being refers to a human being's positive feeling about himself or herself, but it is a subjective concept that comes from personal experiences (Mirabella et al., 2022). In this regard, Mayordomo et al. (2016) state that some dimensions of psychological well-being, such as Mastery of the Environment, acquire great relevance in the adaptation to new stages such as the transition to parenthood or child rearing. Regarding those who choose to be childfree, the still-present stigma about not having children can have a negative effect on the psychological well-being of these individuals. This is because individuals who deviate from the traditional life path during the reproductive years often suffer some disapproval from their environment (Tanaka and Johnson, 2016).

Life satisfaction is a cognitive evaluation that one makes about life as a whole and an indicator of well-being and positive functioning of the individual (Proctor et al., 2017). Feeling satisfaction with life could push a person to take a further step in life, since people prefer to feel that they have successfully finished one stage before getting involved in the next one (Bodin et al., 2021). The life satisfaction of childfree people should also be taken into account, since women who choose to be childfree seem to be satisfied with their lives without children, as well as with their level of freedom and independence (Clarke et al., 2018).

Many studies have been carried out on the socioeconomic factors that are involved in the decision to become a parent or not. In this case, the study aims to find out whether differences exist in the variables perceived social support, psychological well-being and life satisfaction in people who are parents and those who are childfree. In relation to the objective of the study, it is expected that parents show a higher level of psychological well-being in comparison to those who are childfree. It is also expected that participants who are parents report a higher level of life satisfaction than those who are childfree. Lastly, those who have children are expected to score higher on the variable perceived social support compared to the childfree ones.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

The sample of participants consists of 145 subjects between 25 and 45 years of age, residents of the Autonomous Community of the Basque Country. Of the study subjects, 92.4% are women and the remaining 7.6% are men. As for the age ranges of the participants, more than half of the women (59.7%) are between 31 and 40 years old while more than half of the men (63.6%) are more than 40 years old. The origin of the participants is mainly from Bizkaia, with 67.9% of women and 54.5% of men belonging to this group. The sentimental situation of the participants is mostly in a couple for more than six months, both for women (87.3%) and men (72.7%). In relation to the marital status of the participants, approximately half of the women (57.1%) and 37.5% of men are married. These are followed by half of the men (50%) and 29.4% of the women that are in a couple but without a legal relationship. It is noteworthy that in the case of both women (88.8%) and men (81.8%), those with a university education predominate.

2.2. Design and procedure

The present research follows a cross-sectional design, The data collection to carry out the study is done through a digital questionnaire. This allows the data collected to be anonymous and to be entered into a database for subsequent analysis. Lastly, the participants of the study are divided into two groups: those who are parents and those who are childfree.

2.3. Instruments

Sociodemographic questionnaire: This was created ad hoc and included several variables such as age and sex, marital status, current employment status and reasons for deciding whether to have or not to have children, among others.

Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (EMASP; Zimet et al., 1988 adapted to Spanish by Landeta and Calvete (2002): This instrument consists of 12 items that reflect the level of social support perceived by the subject who completes it. It has a 7-alternative response scale, where 1 means "Strongly disagree" and 7 "Strongly agree". This scale has a Cronbach's $\alpha = .85$, indicating that its internal consistency is good. Finally, it has three dimensions which are as follows: Perception of support

received from friends ($\alpha = .92$), Perception of support received from family members ($\alpha = .89$), and Perception of support received from other relevant people ($\alpha = .89$).

Ryff's psychological well-being scales (Ryff and Keyes, 1995) adapted to Spanish (Díaz et al., 2006): This instrument has a total of six scales and 39 items to which participants must respond with a response format where scores range from 1 to 6, meaning 1 "totally disagree" and 6 "totally agree". This scale contains six subscales and are the following: Self-acceptance (Cronbach's $\alpha = .84$), Positive Relationships (Cronbach's $\alpha = .78$), Autonomy (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$), Environmental Mastery (Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$), Personal Growth (Cronbach's $\alpha = .70$) and Purpose in Life (Cronbach's $\alpha = .71$).

Satisfaction with Life Scale (SWLS; Diener et al., 1985) Spanish version by Vazquez et al., (2013): It is composed of five items that evaluate the overall judgment that each person makes about his or her general satisfaction with life, with the understanding that a higher score reflects greater satisfaction. The response options range on a likert scale from 1 ("totally disagree") to 7 ("totally agree"), with a minimum total score of 7 (low satisfaction) and a maximum of 35 (high satisfaction). Finally, the level of internal consistency of this scale is good, since it has a Cronbach's $\alpha = .82$.

2.4. Ethical considerations

The voluntary nature of the participants and the confidentiality of the data were guaranteed at all times. Participation was completely voluntary and complete anonymity was guaranteed. Participants were also informed that, in case of doubt when completing the protocols, they could contact the principal investigator of the study and that they were free to decide to leave the study at any time.

2.5. Data analysis

The analyses were performed using the SPSS 25.0 statistical software. For comparison of the scores obtained in the parents and childfree group, Student's t-test for independent samples was carried out. To interpret the effect size of the differences, the Cohen's d criteria (Cohen, 1988) was used, according to which values below 0.20 are small, up to 0.50 are moderate and above 0.80 are large.

3. Results

Considering the differences observed between the two groups in relation to the variables, there are only significant differences between groups in some dimensions of psychological well-being. As can be seen, those who are parents score higher on these dimensions compared to childfree individuals: Self-acceptance ($t(140) = 2.69, p = .01$); Mastery of the Environment ($t(57.73) = 2.22, p = .03$); and Purpose in Life ($t(141) = 3.86, p < .001$). In all cases, the effect size is moderate. With regard to the life satisfaction variable, statistically significant differences are found between the two groups, with those who have children scoring higher than those who are childfree ($t(50.40) = 1.94, p = .05$). Considering the effect size, this was moderate ($d = .44$). In the remaining variables analyzed, no statistically significant differences were observed (See Table 1).

Table 1. Group differences.

	Mean (SD)		t	p	Cohen's d
	Parents	Childfree individuals			
Total perceived social support	75.74 (17.12)	78.63 (13.55)	-.96	.34	-
Perception of Support Received from Friends	26.02 (5.33)	27.30 (3.70)	-1.63	.10	-
Perception of Support Received from Family Members	24.79 (6.64)	24.75 (6.82)	.03	.97	-
Perception of Support Received from other Relevant People	24.93 (7.08)	26.58 (5.25)	-1.52	.13	-
Self-acceptance	23.89 (4.40)	21.45 (5.88)	2.69*	.00	.50
Positive Relationships	23.89 (4.96)	23.72 (5.56)	.18	.85	-
Autonomy	29.50 (5.80)	28.45 (6.20)	.95	.34	-
Environmental Mastery	25.20 (3.44)	23.51 (4.25)	2.22*	.03	.46
Personal Growth	29.11 (3.86)	29.26 (4.49)	-1.99	.84	-
Purpose in Life	25.56 (4.43)	22.20 (5.25)	3.86**	.00	.72
Satisfaction with Life	20.85 (3.72)	18.92 (5.75)	1.94*	.05	.44

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .001$

4. Discussion

The aim of this study was to check whether differences exist between people who have children and those who are childfree, for the variables psychological well-being, life satisfaction and perceived social support. Participants who were parents were expected to obtain higher scores than childfree participants for the variables in the study.

The results reveal that participants in the group of parents obtained a higher score than those who are childfree, for the variable satisfaction with life. These results go in line with those obtained by Pollmann-Schult (2014), who affirms that parents show significantly higher levels of life satisfaction compared to those who do not have children. Moreover, Nelson-Coffey et al. (2019) propose that aspects such as the sense of efficacy of those who are parents, in addition to the positive relationships with their children, predict higher satisfaction with life. On the contrary, Peavoy (2021) suggests that life satisfaction in parents and childfree individuals did not appear to differ, as both groups could consider their situation as a source of life satisfaction.

With regard to psychological well-being, those who were parents scored higher than childfree people in the subscales Self-acceptance, Environmental Mastery and Purpose in Life. Herbst and Ifcher (2012) support these results when stating that although there has been a general decline in adult psychological well-being in recent decades, this is not entirely true for parents. Furthermore, according to Avison and Furnham (2015), not being a parent may be associated with poorer psychological well-being in countries that are strongly pronatalist and have ingrained beliefs against childlessness. By contrast, Corbett (2018) conducted a study in which both mothers and childfree women showed similar levels of psychological well-being.

This study provides relevant information because, while there is a great deal of recent research on the relationship between sociodemographic variables and parenting decisions, on the contrary, psychological variables have been little studied. Therefore, the results obtained from this study may provide a basis for future research.

In relation to the limitations of the study, one of the main ones would be the notable difference in the number of women and men in the sample, since the participation of men is minimal, compared to the majority of women. In addition, the study sample is not very homogeneous, as most of the participants who took part had a similar profile in relation to some aspects such as the educational level or the current sentimental situation. Lastly, only three psychological variables have been studied of the many that may show differences between groups of parents and childfree individuals. Therefore, future lines of research should continue to study childfree individuals in order to learn more about their reasons and how these have an effect on themselves. In addition, the participation of men should be encouraged in order to obtain data that adequately represents both sexes. Finally, a more homogeneous sample could be used, including participants with more educational levels or a wider range of origin, among other aspects, to obtain more significant results. Even to study the differences between the two groups for more psychological variables other than those included in this study. All this would allow to know better the profile of those who are childfree that have been little studied, and the differences found between them and parents.

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