

FACTORS RELATED TO ACCESS TO FATHERHOOD AND MOTHERHOOD

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Abstract

The declining birth rate has been a social concern for decades. Socioeconomic factors are the most studied concerning the decision to become parents. However, it is a complex and far-reaching decision that is also influenced by multiple psychological, emotional, and relational factors. The aim of this study is to analyze these factors in a sample of women and men around the third decade of life through semi-structured interviews analyzed through Thematic Analysis. The results show that the decision in many cases changes over time and circumstances and that financial and labor stability and the couple's relationship are the most relevant factors when making the decision.

Keywords: *Fatherhood, motherhood, psychological and emotional factors.*

1. Introduction

The declining birth rate is a global problem, which affects society as a whole. Experts predict that the increasing life expectancy and the current low birth rate will generate difficulties in public finances in the not-too-distant future. The problematic emancipation processes, job instability, higher education, and current living conditions are the factors most highlighted by the literature for this decline (George-Nicolae, 2013).

Whether to have children is one of the most important decisions that adults make throughout their lives (Fiori et al., 2017). The different reproductive life projects are grouped into three; (1) "childfree" (Veevers, 1979), people who decide not to have offspring during their lifetime, (2) people who decide to delay their parenthood, a group that is considered the most prominent in recent decades (Yopo Díaz, 2021), and (3) parents, who have made the decision to have children.

In a decision-making process as vital as becoming a parent, the most studied variables refer to socioeconomic factors. As mentioned above, the current economic situation, the demand for higher academic requirements (Smock & Greenland, 2010), the pressure to have offspring as well as a successful career (Harrington, 2019) and the difficulty of reconciling work and family life stand out as significant aspects that affect the decision to not have offspring (Comas d'Argemir et al., 2016). The incorporation of women into the labor market and the greater value placed on individual freedom have also been pointed out as factors that may lead to this decision (Avison & Furnham, 2015).

In addition to the socioeconomic factors that influence this decision, it is also important to analyze the psychological and emotional factors involved in this process, such as past attachments, personality or individual values (Stegen et al., 2021).

The aim of this study is to analyze, using a qualitative approach, the most relevant factors that people mention in their decision-making process to have or to not have children.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

46 people participated in the study, 39 women and 7 men with a mean age of 33.22 ($sd = 5.12$) years. Participants were divided into three groups for the analysis: those who have children; those who do not have children but want them; and those who do not want them.

Table 1. Sociodemographic data.

	N	Women	Men	Age (<i>M, sd</i>)	Married	In a relationship	Single
Parents	19	18	1	35.89 (3.67)	12	6	1
Participants who want children	13	11	2	29.25 (3.33)	1	7	4
Participants who do not want children	14	10	4	33 (5.96)	1	5	8

2.2. Procedure

Participants were recruited through an invitation following their participation in a quantitative study. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews. Although the interviews were designed to capture different aspects of the decision and experience of accessing parenthood, this paper presents and analyzes the first theme around the reasons and circumstances surrounding the decision to have or to not have children.

2.3. Data analysis strategy

Thematic analysis (TA) was used for the analysis. This method is flexible and allows to explore almost any research question and ontological, epistemological and theoretical frameworks (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Two researchers coded a sample of the interviews independently, elaborating codes that captured the explicit meaning of the participants' narratives. Thus, a coding framework was agreed upon, which was used in the analysis of the subsequent interviews by the three researchers, adding more codes to the framework during the process.

We followed the 6-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006): first, a detailed reading of the interviews to familiarize ourselves with the data was carried out; second, we generated initial codes, which identified some relevant and interesting features in the data; third, themes were generated, with the identification of patterns and capturing something important about the research question; the fourth step involved reviewing the themes to move on in the fifth step to defining and labeling the themes. The sixth step involved writing up the results.

3. Results

3.1. "I have children"

The desire to have children has always been present in most of the participants in this group. Most of the participants talked about the presence of this desire or the presence of the maternal/paternal instinct in their lives, saying that "it is something I had always contemplated and had the option to do it" (participant 21, woman, 40 years old), "for me, this is an experience that I had to go through. Just like someone who studies a career because they like it, I had to do motherhood." (participant 16, woman, 28 years old) or "I knew I wanted to have children and the idea was to have one." (participant 25, male, 36 years old).

In addition, for some of the participants, motherhood has involved different processes. For example, one of the participants recounted how she had felt the maternal instinct at the moment of having her first daughter, that she had "almost because you have to have one and that's it" (participant 11, woman, 37 years old). For other participants, and despite the initial desire to become mothers, motherhood has involved the search for the "ideal moment" for it. For a few of these people, the desire for motherhood was not so clearly defined, and although it was present, it was not experienced as a determining factor.

It is important to point out that for these participants, as for the rest of them, parenthood is experienced as a couple, as "a life project for both of us" (participant 30, woman, 42 years old), which sometimes involves talking about it; it is a decision-making process ("we have talked a lot about it. Well, the typical thing, that you talk and talk about it and that you want to be... you want to start a family", participant 13, woman, 33 years old), and negotiation with the partner about the right time for the arrival of the children ("It is true that my husband wanted to have children earlier, but, as I said, because of work and so on, I slowed it down a little bit", participant 15, woman, 37 years old).

The partner, specifically the "right partner," seems to be one of the important factors influencing the decision to become a parent. Ten of the participants spoke of the importance of having the right person in their lives.

Other relevant factors when making the decision are financial and employment stability. "In other words, there was more precariousness" (Participant 1, woman, 36 years old).

Eight of the participants spoke of age as a factor with some weight on the decision, reporting the feeling that it was the age for parenthood: "when suddenly you realize that the age comes so that it has to be now and that it does not make sense to leave it for much longer..." (participant 21, woman, 40 years old).

It seems that there is a certain age, the 30s, which is experienced as the age for parenthood, not wanting to leave it for later because of age ("I mean, I did not want to wait until I was 40 to become a mother; participant 7, woman, 35 years old"), or health issues of the mother or the baby.

The idea of being prepared is related to the aforementioned factors, experienced as necessary condition(s) to access motherhood.

Something also mentioned by some of the participants is the importance of having a support network for parenting, the "tribe", something relevant to be able to access parenthood and be able to reconcile ("well, a bit like the tribe, who can help you and support you", participant 15, woman, 37 years old).

The model of a traditional family may be present, since many of the participants acknowledged having lived such a family model, but this does not necessarily mean that motherhood is experienced as a repetition of the family model of childhood, but rather that it seems to imply a conscious decision and a desire to do so.

Approximately half of the participants reflected on social or family pressure to have children, as well as their experiences of having friends or family around them who have children. Although this social pressure does not seem to have influenced the participants in their decisions, they did report being aware of this pressure, and the influence it can have ("Because everyone tells you that you have to have children and I have always said that we didn't know", participant 10, female, 37 years old).

3.2. "I don't have children, but I want to have"

The desire to have children, as well as liking children are two factors that the participants highlight as an important starting point in deciding to want to become parents. In this sense, the participants explained that the desire to have children is a feeling or, in their words, a "maternal instinct" that has accompanied them throughout their lives and that clearly has an impact on their intention to have offspring. This feeling or instinct has sometimes been reflected in the good connection with the children.

Another element with an important weight in the decision-making of the participants is their partners' role. Among those who have a partner, it has to do with feeling that their partner is the person with whom they can initiate a joint parenthood project. Likewise, among those who do not have a partner, some pointed to the feeling of wanting or needing to share this project with another person: "I would say that it is not essential, but... yes, I personally would like to be able to share this life project with another person" (participant 45, man, 28). About the role of the partner, among those with a partner, it was important to have reached a consensus, first, on wanting to have children and second, on the best time to have them.

Family legacies also play a role in the decision to have children. The make-up and structure of their families of origin and even the meaning of family, based on what they experienced in their own families, seems to be an aspect that, according to the participants, plays a role in their desire to be a mother or father.

Another aspect to highlight among the factors that influence the desire to be a mother or father is personality. Specifically, several participants in this group pointed to two personality characteristics that they felt might be involved in this desire, the tendency to be caregivers and to be responsible people. Participant 34 (female, 25) explained: "it is something I carry very much in my day to day life, caregiving".

The role of society is another factor that participants explored as an aspect that has an impact on their desire to be mothers and fathers: "I think there is pressure from a very young age to be a mother, and if you are not a mother you are not 100% complete" (participant 4, female, 32). Participant 47 (male, 32) also spoke of the role of society: "At a social level it is established that at a certain age, you have to have children, isn't it?".

3.3. "I do not want to have children"

Regarding the desire to be a parent, this group systematically reported not wanting to have children. The participants reported not feeling the need or the desire to be parents. "Let's say that I haven't felt the desire, because I don't feel the need, period," said participant 37 (woman, 29 years old). This desire to not have children appears to be related to the non-presence of the maternal instinct and never having felt it, even when young. This aspect appeared in some of the older participants of the group.

This articulated and explicit decision, taken early in youth or early adulthood, seems to fit with what Tietjens Meyers (2001) calls "early articulators" and which has been formulated as the choice of a

childless life, consistent with the decision taken (Blackstone & Stewart, 2012). Following these authors, there is another avenue for non-parenthood, which would consist of postponing the decision, until the moment when it is biologically impossible. This could be the case of participant 20, who described how from an initial idea of having children she had evolved to not wanting to have children and, close to the moment of potentially not being able to have children biologically, she reflected on how she experienced it.

“Well, at this moment I haven't felt the need, I haven't felt it, to want to have children and although years ago I did imagine my future having them, at this moment I haven't felt it at this age and I think I have little time left so I may not have them and this decision is not affecting me” (woman, 36 years old).

This could also be the reason behind the "gray zone", referred to by participant 2, in which several of the participants were moving, by not completely ruling out a future parenthood. Feeling ready, not liking children or thinking about oneself were also mentioned.

The decision-making process in these participants involved, for many of them, a process of reflection and a conscious and deliberate decision. In this group of participants, the idea that parenthood is an important decision, and that it is a decision that has to be thought through and given a lot of thought. Constant re-evaluation can be experienced as not having made the decision.

On the other hand, there is an element of negotiation with the partner, but most of the participants agreed with their partners and shared the decision to not become parents. However, four of the participants referred to the fact that their partner's choice would make them either reconsider their own decision ("So it is something that I have always thought that if my partner wanted it and wanted it, it would not be a resounding no, no? Well, I would have considered it", participant 46, female, 40 years old; "when I have had partners who wanted to have children, that is what makes you rethink it", participant 39, male, 29 years old) or have agreed to parenthood, guided by the choice and desire of the partner.

Undoubtedly, financial issues were mentioned as one of the important factors for not having children. Some of the participants recounted the difficulties in remaining financially independent and how having a dependent child would be an unbearable financial burden. Financial stability seems to be an important precondition for starting a family. On the other hand, having a partner also seems to be an important condition for the decision whether to have children or not. It seems to be important, according to the participants, to be very clear that the potential partner is the right person.

4. Discussion

Through the interviews, we can conclude that, even though in all three groups the idea of having children or not having children has been present in their lives, this decision is not totally defined for some people and it evolves throughout life or depending on the circumstances. This is a relevant conclusion since it implies that there is a high percentage of people who, under certain circumstances, could potentially have children. Therefore, the policies and measures promoted in this regard could lead to this decision.

As for the main reasons given by the participants for not having more children, postponing this decision or not wishing to have more children, the following stand out:

a) Incompatibility with professional development. Participants refer that the perception of an inadequate work-family conciliation and job instability are two key factors when deciding to have children or not.

b) Insufficient financial resources. Currently, the high level of job insecurity means that people live a more insecure life and that, consequently, their life projects, such as becoming a parent, are frustrated. Furthermore, several studies have shown that it is women who suffer the most from this job insecurity. Bearing in mind that most of the participants in this study are women, it is to be expected that although many of them have the desire to become mothers, their current situation makes them postpone their decision.

c) Couple-related issues. Stability in the couple and the possibility of emancipation are two variables that are related to the decision to become a parent. Currently, delaying parenthood is seen as something in keeping with the socioeconomic situation. Our findings and results indicate that couples need to have an acceptable financial stability that allows them to become emancipated to be able to perceive sufficient stability in the couple to decide to become parents. However, a clearly relevant factor is the couple. While in the group of people who have children the decision is made as a couple and the times are valued and negotiated, accommodating these within the couple, in the group of people who do not have children but want to have them, the couple seems to have an important weight as a necessary condition, which would indicate that maternity/paternity is mostly a life project that is lived as a couple. On the other hand, for the group of people who do not want to have children, there is also a "gray zone",

since maternity/paternity is not totally ruled out and the desire of the couple would at least make the decision be reevaluated.

The desire to maintain the current lifestyle. Participants value their lifestyle positively, as well as leisure time and being able to travel, and perceive that having a child will affect them negatively at this level. Undoubtedly, socioeconomic factors are not the only ones that affect the decision to become parents or not. At the social and cultural level, there have also been changes in which men and women, compared to past generations, have consciously decided to prioritize their lifestyle over the decision to become parents. Perhaps this change leads us to think that being a father or mother is no longer a social mandate, but is now perceived as a decision to be made. Qualitative data support this idea: the participants who do not wish to become a father or a mother are not willing to become one.

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