

The role of Societal Pessimism in Childfree Rationales: Quantitative and Qualitative insights from the Netherlands

Authors: Nola Cammu; Katya Ivanova; Mirthe Megens; Elizabeth Young.

Extended abstract:

Objective: *The present study investigates the role of ‘societal pessimism’ in childfree rationales of Dutch adults of prime reproductive age (25-45) via quantitative and a qualitative exploration of the reasons why individuals choose to remain childless. In doing so, this study directly and innovatively adds to the existing body of research on contemporary narratives of childfree adults.*

Background: *Demographic shifts resulting from low fertility rates pose a key challenge to modern societies. Attempts to classify childfree motivations have highlighted various themes, including ‘societal pessimism’; an umbrella term that denotes the feeling that the world is not developing in a positive direction. Although it is widely documented that most childfree adults declare ‘just not wanting to have children’ as their main motive, environmental concerns are being mentioned with growing frequency. Recent empirical work has linked concerns about global warming with how (young) people reason about having children. In a European context, there is some evidence that broad societal pessimism, and environmental concerns do play a role in fertility behavior and/or intentions.*

Method: *Following an “explanatory mixed methods approach” (Thomeer, Brantley & Hernandez 2024), we base our analysis on the descriptive results of quantitative findings on childfree rationales from the Dutch longitudinal LISS panel in tandem with 38 in-depth interviews with Dutch men and women in prime reproductive age, who were recruited via the LISS panel. This panel consists of a true probability sample of Dutch households.*

Results: *Childfree rationales are highly personal and diverse, much more so than predefined surveys can capture. In sum, the most apparent motivations for both childfree men and women as expressed during the interviews, were a desire for flexibility and freedom in their lives, followed by a general sense of being ‘unfit’ for parenthood, and simply the lack of desire to become a parent. Although societal pessimistic reasons played an additional role for most participants, these concerns were found to be secondary or even tertiary reflections rather than core motivations. In addition, reasons of societal pessimism were found to be broader than environmentalism alone.*

Conclusion: *Personal motivations and circumstances appear the main driver in participants’ fertility decision-making processes, with societal and environmental reasons seeming to be cited primarily to reinforce or validate existing personal rationales.*

Keywords: *Childfree motivations, Societal Pessimism, The Netherlands, in-depth interviews*