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Attitudes concerning family size in Poland: a replication study

Abstract: This article reports on a replication study of “Childless by choice? Attributions and attitudes concerning family size”, research published in *Social Behavior and Personality* and carried out by Valerie LaMastro in 2001. In the study presented in this paper the author examined the personality characteristics ascribed by naive perceivers to people with families of varying sizes. Students ($N = 284$) read one of twenty-four paragraphs describing a heterosexual couple who varied in the number of children they had (no children, one child, two children, six children) and in male and female employment status. Targets were rated on 28 personality characteristics and seven relationship quality statements concerning the level of family happiness. The results obtained indicated that a childless pair was viewed as less happy than those with children. Parents of any size family were, however, perceived similarly.

Key words: Infertility, Family size, Childlessness

Throughout human history, infertility has been a sensitive issue and has traditionally been a concern of individuals (couples) rather than of society at large. More recently, however, a demographic crisis has raised the issue of infertility to a new level of public awareness and political discussion (Kirca and Pasinoglu, 2013; Leiblum, Aviv and Hamer, 1998; Stobel-Richter, Beutel, Finck, and Brahler, 2005; Templeton, 1995). Based on declining birth rates observed around the world, one may conclude that the number of childless people is growing (Frejka, Sobotka, Hoem, and Toulemon, 2008; Myrskylä, Kohler, and Billari, 2009). Childlessness, of course, is not always the product of infertility. It may well be the result of intentional choice—people simply come to the conclusion that they do not want to have children, and consequently they do not (Greil, Slauson-Blevins and McQuillan, 2010).

In 2001, the psychological journal *Social Behavior and Personality* published an article by Valerie LaMastro of Rowan University (NJ, USA). The author examined the opinions of naive perceivers regarding the voluntary or involuntary nature of a target couple's family size. Participants were randomly assigned to read one of

twenty-four short stories describing a married couple. The descriptions varied with respect to the number of children (no children, one child, two children, six children), male occupational status (professional, non-professional) and female occupational status (professional, non-professional, not employed outside the home). Results revealed that childless individuals were rated less favorably than parents. However, parents of any family size were perceived similarly. LaMastro suggested that the relatively negative opinion concerning childless the couple resulted from the fact that participants were inclined to make dispositional attribution errors (Ross, 1977) – they thought that the target couple had voluntarily chosen the size of their family. In the case of childless the couple, this meant they were seen as people who did not desire to have children rather than as sufferers of infertility. Since the reluctance to have children (as opposed to medically-related childlessness) may be treated as a manifestation of selfishness, the couple without children was evaluated less favorably than those with children.

The aforementioned study was replicated in 2013 in Poland. Very similar participants (university students)

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were invited to take part in the research. Also, the number of participants in the second study was almost identical to that of the first (N=284 in the former, N=274 in the latter). While LaMastro had some problems with recruiting male participants for her research (77% of her participants were female), our sample was more heterogeneous (only 60% of participants were female).

Method

Participants

A total of 284 students from four institutions - University of Wrocław, University of Social Science and Humanities, University of Lower Silesia and Lubin Higher School - took part in the research. Females comprised 172 of the participants, while 112 of them were males. The average age of participants was 23.93 (SD = 6.81), ranging from 18 to 54 years old. The gender and age distributions of the sample were representative of the participant pool at the universities where data were collected.

Instruments and procedure

Participants who volunteered to take part in a study on impression formation were randomly assigned to read one of twenty-four paragraphs describing a married couple in their early forties. The stories varied with respect to number of children (no children, one child, two children, six children), female employment status (professional, non-professional, not employed outside the home) and male employment status (professional, non professional)

The couple was described as follows:

“Karen and Michael are an attractive couple in their early forties. They have been married almost 20 years and they have no children/have one child/have two children/have six children.. Michael is a finance manager employed by a large corporation/a construction worker, and Karen is a human resources manager employed by a large corporation/a low-level clerk/is not employed outside the home. They met during a driving course and were married a year later. Karen and Michael share a variety of interests and hobbies, and frequently socialize with family and friends.”

Participants provided demographic information concerning their age and gender, and were then asked to rate the female and male targets separately on a series of twenty-eight 7-point bipolar trait scales (see Tables 1 and 2 for details). They subsequently provided their attributions for the size of the couple's family and responded to a series of seven statements concerning the couple's relationships on a five-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (5) (see Table 3 for details).

All items were taken from the previous study by LaMastro (2001).

Results

For the purposes of scale constructions, factor analyses with oblique rotation were conducted on the 28 traits descriptors for male and female targets separately, and on the seven items concerning marital relationship quality.

As in LaMastro's (2001) original study, all items below .60 were eliminated from the final measures. As shown in Table 1, two factors emerged from the analysis of the ratings for female personality characteristics. These factors were labeled 'adjustment' (Cronbach's alpha = .81) and 'ambition' (Cronbach's alpha = .89).

Table 1. Factor Analysis on Female Personality Characteristics

	Factor Loading	
	1	2
1. Caring vs Uncaring	-.565	-.455
2. Warm vs Cold	-.476	-.570
3. Kind vs. Unkind	-.519	-.512
4. Nurturing vs. Not nurturing	-.532	-.577
5. Sincere vs. Insincere	-.523	-.171
6. Sensitive vs. Insensitive	-.434	-.500
7. Traditional vs. Non-traditional	-.183	-.536
8. Feminine vs. Masculine	-.488	-.252
9. Happy vs. Unhappy	-.571	-.081
10. Well adjusted vs. Not well-adjusted	-.648	.017
11. Likable vs. Unlikable	-.556	-.452
12. Reliable vs. Unreliable	-.635	-.281
13. Mature vs. Immature	-.715	-.082
14. Success-oriented vs. Not success-oriented	-.410	.764
15. Ambitious vs. Not ambitious	-.505	.737
16. Career vs Not Career oriented	-.320	.817
17. Determined vs. Not determined	-.593	.571
18. Hardworking vs. Not hardworking	-.691	.165
19. Successful vs. Unsuccessful	-.495	.708
20. Confident vs. Not confident	-.586	.613
21. Competent vs. Incompetent	-.692	.426
22. Feels sorry for self vs. Does not feel sorry for self	.434	-.057
23. Feels interior vs. Does not feel interior	.505	-.263
24. Self-centered vs. Not self-centered	.305	.387
25. Lonely vs. Not lonely	.402	-.041
26. Anxious vs. Not anxious	.460	.278
27. Materialistic vs. Not materialistic	.210	.564
28. Stressed vs. Not stressed	.222	.277

Analysis of the ratings of male characteristics also resulted in the emergence of two similar two factors (see Table 2), although in some cases different items loaded onto the factors (Cronbach's alpha = .87 for adjustment and .76 for ambition).

Table 2. Factor Analysis on Male Personality Characteristics

	Factor Loading	
	1	2
1. Caring vs Uncaring	-.486	-.477
2. Warm vs Cold	-.431	-.586
3. Kind vs. Unkind	-.525	-.514
4. Nurturing vs. Not nurturing	-.526	-.530
5. Sincere vs. Insincere	-.519	-.355
6. Sensitive vs. Insensitive	-.387	-.449
7. Traditional vs. Non-traditional	-.227	-.395
8. Feminina vs. Masculine	.305	.242
9. Happy vs. Unhappy	-.596	-.111
10. Well adjusted vs. Not well-adjusted	-.637	-.231
11. Likable vs. Unlikable	-.571	-.468
12. Reliable vs. Unreliable	-.675	-.231
13. Mature vs. Immature	-.701	-.108
14. Success-oriented vs. Not success-oriented	-.549	.624
15. Ambitious vs. Not ambitious	-.661	.573
16. Career vs Not Career oriented	-.532	.675
17. Determined vs. Not determined	-.490	.277
18. Hardworking vs. Not hardowrking	-.615	.090
19. Successful vs. Unsuccessful	-.639	.576
20. Confident vs. Not confident	-.698	.433
21. Competent vs. Incompetent	-.669	.366
22. Feels sorry for self vs. Does not feel sorry for self	.585	-.177
23. Feels interior vs. Does not feel interior	.603	-.253
24. Self-centered vs. Not self-centered	.257	.471
25. Lonely vs. Not lonely	.538	.182
26. Anxious vs. Not anxious	.423	.221
27. Materialistic vs. Not materialistic	.021	.601
28. Stressed vs. Not stressed	.043	.412

As shown in Table 3, two factors were obtained from the analysis of items addressing marital relationship quality. The first factor was named 'satisfaction' (Cronbach's alpha = .83). The second factor was constructed on only two items and was named 'intention'.

A MANOVA analysis of 2 (participants' gender) x 4 (family size) x 3 (employment status) for personality characteristics ascribed to the woman was conducted. For the adjustment variable, only two main effects were obtained: participants' gender – $F(1,260) = 13.14, p < .0001 \eta^2 = .040$; female participants described the woman as better-adjusted ($M = 12.268$) than male participants ($M=15.093$), and employment status – $F(2,260) = 24.70, p < .0001 \eta^2 = .154$. A Tukey's test revealed that the female target was rated as significantly less well-adjusted ($M=16.09$) when she was unemployed than when she was a working non-professional ($M=14.80$) or working professional ($M=16.06$). The differences between working non-professional and working professional were also significant. For the ambition variable, a main effect of employment status and two interactions (participants' gender x employment status and family size and employment status) were obtained. Concerning the main effect of employment status ($F(2,260) = 139.09, p < .0001 \eta^2 = .51$), the target was viewed as the least ambitious when she was not working outside the home ($M = 18.43$), more ambitious when she performed a non-professional job ($M = 16.43$) and most ambitious when she was a manager ($M = 8.18$). This pattern of results was influenced by the gender of the participants – $F(2,260) = 3.83, p < .023 \eta^2 = .022$. It turned out that in conditions where the woman was presented as a manager, female respondents saw her as more ambitious (7.56) than did male respondents (8.80). The interaction of the number of children x status – $F(2,260) = 5.03, p < .0001 \eta^2 = .09$ turned out to be more complicated. Overall, respondents saw a woman as relatively lacking in ambition in conditions where she did not work out side the home ($M=18.433$); denial of her ambition was particularly pronounced when she had children ($M=19.91$). Participants attributed relatively higher ambition to her in the condition when she had two children ($M=16.81$). Ambition, according to respondents, was a very distinct feature of the target woman in conditions when she was presented as a manager (7.20), especially when she was childless ($M=5.53$).

Table 3. Factor Analyses of Relationships Quality Items

	Factor Loading	
	1	2
1. Overall, Karen and Michael will have a good life together	.321	-.716
2. Karen and Michael have a happy marriage	-.256	.796
3. Karen and Michael will enjoy a happy old age together	.798	.156
4. Karen and Michael are likely to stay married for the rest of their lives	.824	.209
5. Karen and Michael have a fulfilling sexual relationship	.825	.048
6. Karen and Michael argue over money	.729	-.006
7. Karen and Michael worry about their future together	.621	.164

A similar MANOVA analysis of 2 (participants' gender) x 4 (family size) x 2 (employment status) for personality characteristics ascribed to the man was conducted, but no statistical effects were obtained. Concerning the ratings of marital satisfaction ascribed to the couple, main effects of female employment status – $F(2, 260) = 6.54, p < .002 \eta^2 = .04$ and family size – $F(3, 260) = 6.89, p < .001 \eta^2 = .026$ were recorded. Marital satisfaction was rated lower ($M=14.33$) in the condition when the female did not work outside the home than when she was employed ($M = 12.75$ when she was presented as a manager and $M = 12.24$ when she was described as a low-level clerk). Marital satisfaction was rated lower when the couple was childless ($M=13.01$) than when they had a child or multiple children ($M = 12.03$).

The pattern of results concerning the intention variable (willingness to have [more] children) was more complicated. MANOVA analysis revealed two main effects: family size [$F(260) = 14.69, p < .0001 \eta^2 = .167$] and male's employment status [$F(1, 260) = 5.44, p < .02 \eta^2 = .013$], as well as a participants' gender x family size interaction [$F(3, 260) = 3.09, p < .03 \eta^2 = .037$]. When participants responded to questions about whether the couple had planned to have this number of offspring and whether the couple would have liked to have children (or more children) but were unable to do so, the couple with two children was evaluated in the most unequivocal way: it was thought that they were planning just that number of offspring at the beginning of their marriage, and that it was not their intention to have more children now (M for this factor = 5.49). Situations in which the couple had one child ($M = 6.99$) or six children ($M = 6.89$) were perceived as slightly less likely to be planned. In the case of a childless couple, participants thought that this situation was not planned at the beginning of the marriage, ($M = 7.64$). Also, information about male employment status had an impact on participants' opinions about the couple's willingness to have (more) children ($M=6.48$ in low status condition vs. $M = 7.03$ in high status condition). Analysis of participants' gender x family size interaction revealed that the pattern of results from female respondents was similar to the main effect of family size. Male participants, however, expressed slightly different opinions – they treated the 2+2 family as more likely to be planned and desired ($M = 5.79$) than all other models (2+0, 2+1 and 2+6) – ($M = 7.01$; $M = 6.98$; and $M = 7.11$) respectively.

Discussion

In a study conducted in Poland and patterned on original research carried out by LaMastro 13 years prior, it turned out that participants similarly believed a childless couple experienced worse marital satisfaction than a couple with a child or multiple children. Interestingly, the number of children did not have an influence on the satisfaction attributed to target spouses. These results are thus fully in line with those reported by LaMastro.

It should be noted that the study conducted over a decade earlier showed that, in American society,

attitudes toward couples bringing up only one child were as negative as those toward childless couples. In both cases, such married couples were perceived as egotistical and selfish, concerned only with their own career or their own pleasures. Today, however, couples with one child are perceived and evaluated in the same way as those having two or six children. This seems to be related to low fertility rates prevalent in present times (they are particularly low in Poland – according to World Bank data, the average woman has 1.3 children – World Bank data (2014)). One may therefore claim that having only one child is now a social norm rather than something exceptional.

The original research by LaMastro demonstrated that childlessness was perceived by participants as less often planned by a couple than situations in which there are any number of children in the family. This pattern of results was replicated in Poland, but only in respect of female participants. Men, however, believed that a given family had been fully planned by a couple only when they had two children. All other situations (childlessness and having one or six children) were viewed as the result of previous intentional planning to a lesser extent. I must admit that I am unable to find a convincing explanation for such differences in the opinions between male and female participants.

Generally speaking, the study conducted in Poland replicated the most important results obtained by LaMastro. It should be said, however, that the use of students as participants in both studies constitutes a limitation, as people at this stage of life may not have deeply-held opinions involving family size or infertility problems. In order to gain a deeper knowledge of the characteristics attributed to childless couples (in comparison to couples with children) in USA and Poland, future investigations should focus on gathering data from community-based populations in both countries.

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