

Childlessness: values or constraints? Towards a new way of life in Switzerland?

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ABSTRACT

An abundant literature focuses on “unmet needs for children”, that is to say the gap between intentions regarding children and their realization. Implicit here is that a high degree of rationality underlies planning a family. Intentions are considered a good predictor of the achieved family size in the absence of constraints, especially in terms of opportunity costs for women. In particular, very low fertility, including a high level of childlessness, is ascribed to a discrepancy between more gender equality in the public sphere and a share of domestic tasks that remains traditional. In line with a series of studies addressing the issues of norms and values, we have chosen to consider here the normative framework that shapes parenting plans and their realization.

Childlessness has a long history in Switzerland, associated initially with the rise of celibacy in the 19th century and later, in the post-war era, with the difficulty in reconciling career and family in a conservative context. Although now apparently stabilized, the level of childlessness remains among the highest in Europe (at a level around 20% among women aged 45 and over). One can therefore wonder whether this is still due to constraints, i.e. the difficulty in reconciling family life and other aspirations, or whether a new way of life is emerging. Therefore, we consider here whether childless persons differ in their life view, family plans and resources. In doing so, we refer to two conceptual frameworks: the Capability Approach developed by Sen et al and the concept of ambivalence based on the works of Luscher among others. In other words, we consider childlessness in terms of “freedom to live the life one has reason to value” through values, agency and choice, and personal or collective resources. We therefore proceed in three steps: 1) Values: compare opinions on parental life of childless people with others; 2) Agency and choice: are these values and behaviour coherent with their intentions, or is there ambivalence between the norms and personal plans; 3) Resources: do childless persons enjoy similar personal and family resources (conversion factors) that enable them to implement their parental plans.

We use data from the 2013 Swiss Family Survey and whenever possible compare this with the previous one undertaken in 1995. We compare women older than 35 years and men older than 37 years¹ who had no fertility experience with those who had. Absence of fertility experience is measured by childlessness (no biological, adopted, or other children cohabitating) and the absence of current or planned pregnancy (i.e. stopped contraception to become pregnant), of stillbirth and of treatment for sterility. Views about parental life are considered through the answer to two questions similar to those in the **Gender and Generation S**urveys: the perceived consequences of the arrival of a (new) child² and the

¹ Age at which 75% of women and of men had their first child.

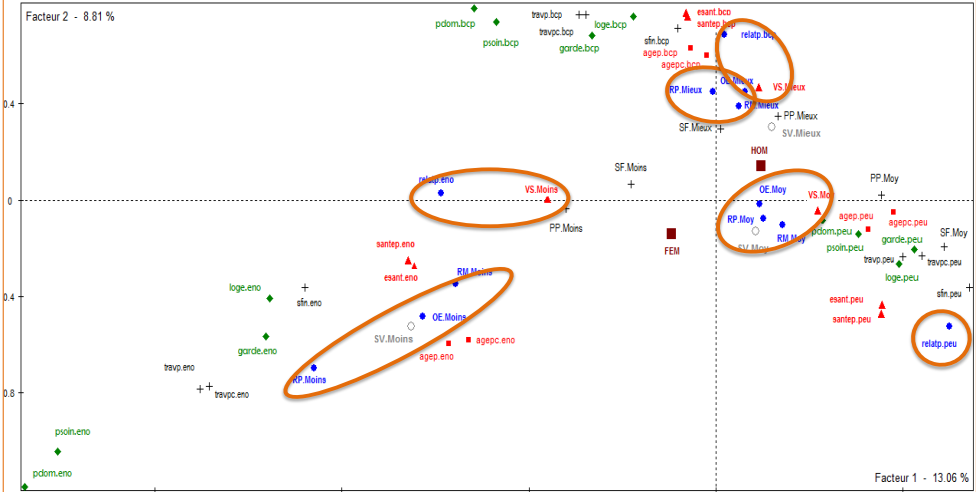
² Imagine (even though you do not want or cannot have one) that you have a (another) child in the next three years: what effect do you think this will have on different aspects of your life? Do you think that having a (another) child would be better or worse for (author’s translation from the French questionnaire)

factors that may influence the decision to have a (another) child³.

Parental views by fertility experience: an exploratory analysis

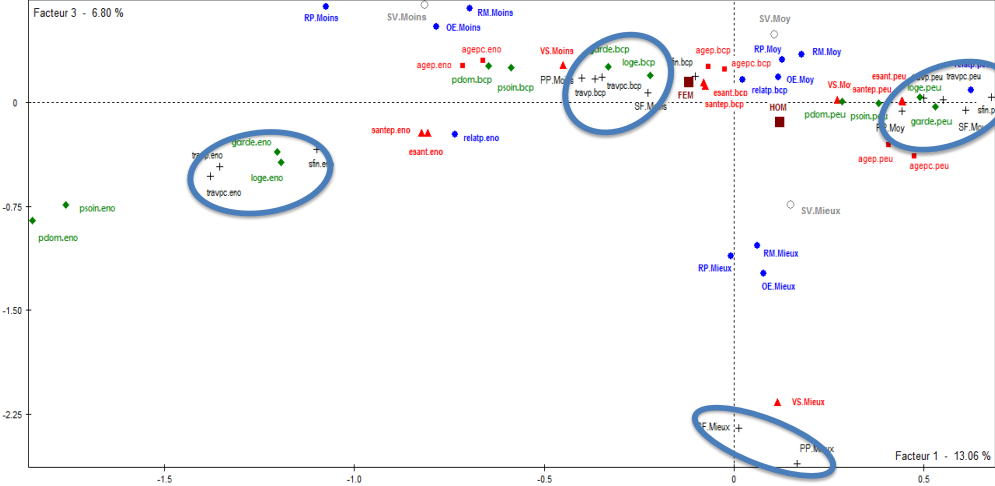
An exploratory analysis (factor analysis on the total population) shows no clear-cut clusters, but distinguishes relational dimensions from material ones (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Profiles of opinions (consequences and factors associated with the arrival of a (another) child. 1a. Relational dimensions (on factors 1 and 2).



Relational dimensions :
Consequences on : the opinion of the entourage (OE), the relationship with the parents (RP), with the partner (RM), sexual life (VS), life satisfaction (SV).
Factors influencing decision : quality of the relationship with the partner (relatp)

Figure 1. Profiles of opinions (consequences and factors associated with the arrival of a (another) child. 1b. Material dimensions (on factors 1 and 3).



Material dimensions :
Consequences on : professional perspectives (PP) and financial situation (SF).
Factors influencing decision : job conditions of subject (travpc) and of partner (travp); financial situation (sfin); conditions of accomodation (loge); availability child care (garde)

³ One can have various reasons for wanting, or not wanting, a (another) child. To what extent would your possible decision to have, or not, a (another) child in the next three years depend on the following factors?

Globally, the arrival of a (another) child is seen as having negative material consequences and positive relational ones. The three dimensions that are anticipated to improve the most are life satisfaction, the feeling of closeness with the partner and with the parents; those that would deteriorate the most are seen as the financial situation, the possibility to do what one wishes in everyday life and professional perspectives. Factors most important in the decision to have a (another) child are age, the quality of the relationship with the partner, the financial situation and health. We examine hereafter the differences by sex and fertility experience.

Health and material dimensions

As expected, age is a major factor in the decision to have a child, especially among women and even more among those who already had a fertility experience (Figure 2). Among men, those without fertility experience give less importance to health and material factors, except work conditions, in their decision to have a child than those who already had fertility experience. Among women, this is the case only as regards age and health, material conditions being slightly more important among those without fertility experience. Thus, material conditions appear to play an important role in the decision and are anticipated to worsen. As shown in Figure 3, this negative anticipation is however slightly lower among those without fertility experience. Those with fertility experience could be described as more realistic about the impact of the arrival of the child.

Figure 2. Material and health factors that may influence very much/much the decision to have a (another) child. Women > 35 years and men > 37 years with and without fertility experience

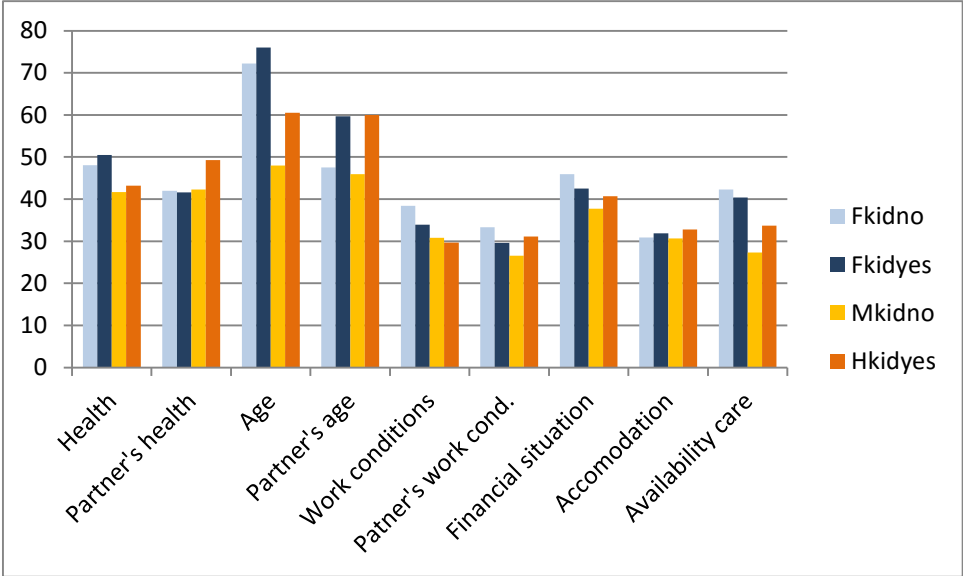
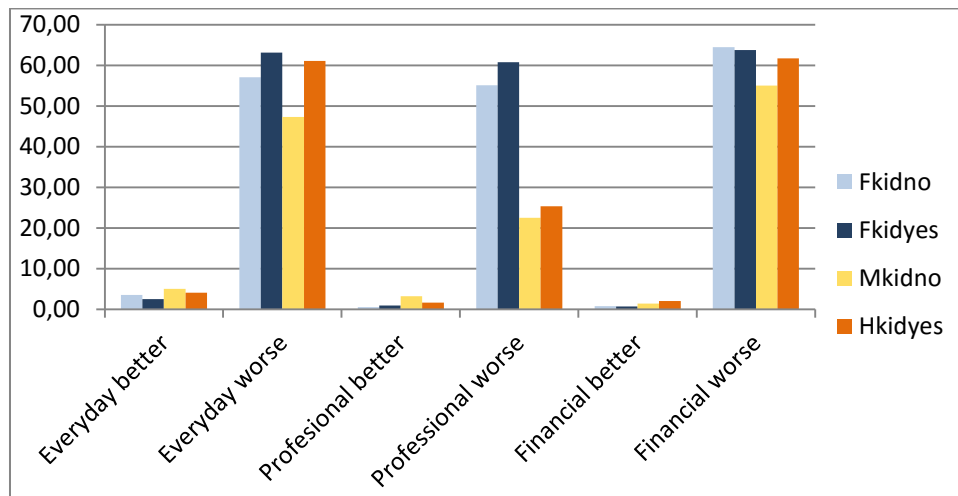


Figure 3. Material consequences of the arrival of a child (another child)

Women > 35 years and men > 37 years with and without fertility experience



Relational dimensions

Although not as important as health dimensions, the quality of the relationship with the partner is among the main determinant of the decision to have a child, much more than the anticipated share of domestic tasks and of the care of children. (Figure 4). Men without fertility experience give a little less importance to these three factors. In contrast, among women, fertility experience slightly attenuates the importance given to child care, slightly increases that of the share of domestic tasks and has no effect on the importance of the relationship with the partner. It is in the anticipation of the relational consequences of the arrival of the child that the previous experience of fertility makes the largest difference: those without a fertility experience anticipate more favourable consequences in the five dimensions considered, especially among women (Figure 5).

Figure 4. Relational factors that may influence very much/much the decision to have a (another) child. Women > 35 years and men > 37 years with and without fertility experience

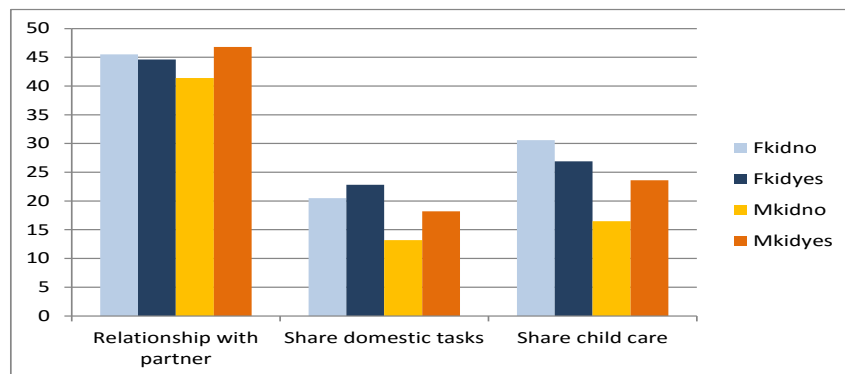
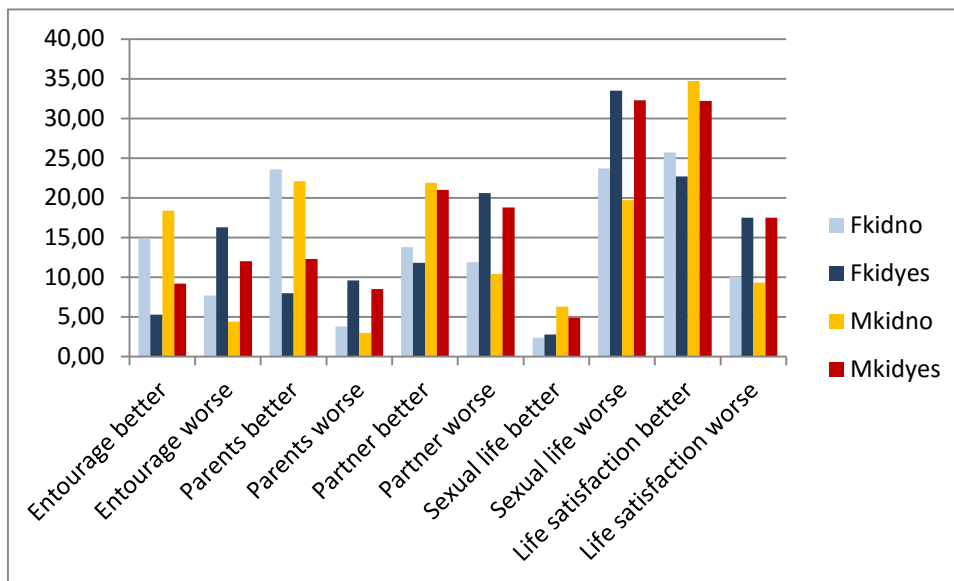


Figure 5. Relational consequences of the arrival of a child (another child)

Women > 35 years and men > 37 years with and without fertility experience



In short, this exploratory analysis shows that women and men with no experience of fertility give less importance to constraints related to age and health, as well as to the share of domestic tasks. Their anticipation of negative consequences on their sexual life is also less pronounced. Most of all, childless women and men anticipate to a higher degree a positive impact on their relationship with their surroundings and their life satisfaction. However, childless women differ from childless men inasmuch as the latter are less prone to giving importance to material factors, while childless women appear more preoccupied by material security than women who already have children or at least an experience of fertility.

Therefore, we cannot conclude on these preliminary results that persons with no child and not trying to have one have a radically different view of family life than those who are already parents. They seem to be no more ambivalent about planning for a child and appear to have a positive view of parental life, anticipating less material burden and more relational benefits.

Next steps:

Agency and resources: factors associated with the profile of family values among persons with or without fertility experience.

We shall proceed by constructing cumulative indices of profiles of material and relational anticipation and analysing their differences between persons with or without fertility experience. The two subsequent steps – analysis of agency/choice and of resources – will be applied by controlling for the appropriate factors. Ambivalence between norms and family plans will be tested through the role of values (degree of traditionalism) and of intentions. Resources will be considered at the personal level (education, income) and at the family level (couple and family network).