

Psychosocial factors in family formation

Traditional sociodemographic factors and economic uncertainty do not fully explain recent changes in fertility rates (Comolli et al., 2021; Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson, 2022).

In recent years, a growing focus has been on the psychosocial factors influencing family formation. These factors encompass both changes in individuals' values, desires, and goals and psychological barriers to family formation, such as subjectively experienced uncertainty, the impact of social media usage, the complexities of relationships and identity development, the rise in mental health issues, and the interconnections among these elements.

Our research has found that:

1. Identity uncertainty predicts childlessness regardless of socioeconomic status (Mannerström et al., 2025).

Identity in this context refers to certainty about oneself and one's "direction" in life (what is my role, what I want). Identity is built on the ability to recognise one's own preferences, make choices, and commit. If one is not sure of oneself, it is more difficult to commit to a partner, and one is more likely to remain childless, regardless of income and education level.

This suggests more broadly that financial uncertainty does not alone explain childlessness, but so too does the inability and unwillingness to commit to, for example, a partner, family, or work.

Previous studies suggest that identity formation is becoming more difficult. This is due to the seemingly infinite number of life options central to consumer society (e.g., on social media) combined with the prevailing ethos of optimizing oneself

and life and "maximizing" happiness. It is difficult to decide, settle, and be content when constantly forced to move towards something better.

2. Male typicality in values lowers the chances of having children (Sortheix et al., 2025).

This effect is found for men and women who score high on values highly endorsed by men (person-focused values, such as power and achievement). Conversely, high female typicality is defined by values highly endorsed by women (social-focused, such as caring for the well-being of others and society), which relates to higher chances of having children for both genders. Male and female value typicality is based on the empirical responses to the ten values (see Ilmarinen et al., 2023). The connection between male value typicality and childlessness has remained constant in Europe.

Some have suggested that current value polarization, especially among youth, could drive men and women apart, creating difficulties for partnership formation. This view builds partly on polarization in educational levels between men and women, with women becoming significantly overrepresented in higher education. This development translates into different worldviews, values, and dating preferences.

However, our results using the European Social Survey, with representative samples from over 35 countries and over 20 years, do not show any evidence of value polarization between genders, i.e., men and women do not seem to be drifting apart in their values (Sortheix et al., forthcoming).

3. The appreciation of hedonism has increased significantly among young people, and it predicts childlessness (Mannerström et al., ongoing).

In value research, hedonism refers to the pursuit of one's pleasure and enjoyment and self-indulgence. Preliminary analyses of young Finnish people show that their values have not moved apart but are moving in the same direction. The trend is somewhat contradictory: on the one hand, the support for self-centered hedonism has strengthened, and on the other hand, the appreciation of the well-being of others (i.e. benevolence and universalism) has also increased, when comparing young people in the early part of the millennium and today.

At the individual level, there is also a significant connection between hedonism and childlessness: the more hedonistic a person's values, the more likely they are to be childless. Valuing hedonism does not mean that a person does not want to have a family, but other "lighter" or more manageable commitments take precedence (e.g. career, travel, hobbies).

However, it must be remembered that reported values always reflect societal norms, i.e. expectations of what is expected to be thought and done. In a consumer-oriented culture, the immediate satisfaction of individual desires and pleasures, "living in the moment," and the avoidance of obligations and irrevocable commitments are not only more permissible than before, but increasingly also an obligation. At the same time, today's young people are expected to care about others, the wider society, and the environment.

Societal norms regarding the individual's free and immediate self-expression can thus paradoxically act as an "obstacle" to the individual's more far-reaching self-expression. Here too, it must be noted that there is still great uncertainty surrounding the results, as more comprehensive group-level analyses are pending.

Conclusions

Childlessness is linked to new psychosocial barriers brought about by societal changes.

The vast majority of young adults still report that they want children, but the current climate of attitudes does not favor settling down and committing. In other words, many young people today dream of a family, but never achieve an "good-enough position": they may feel they are never ready to start a family, because they are constantly forced to reflect on the shortcomings in different areas of their lives and how to improve them (e.g. career, partner, hobbies).

Previous studies show that many young people today are increasingly seeking comfort in the present moment and, on the other hand, planning far into the future (e.g., "I want this now, then that, then a partner, and then a family"). The equation seems to be dominated by the illusion of complete control over life events, as if life could be arranged according to one's own wishes without uncertainties and overlaps, and things would happen when one knows that one is ready for them.

The significant rise of hedonism may also explain why the free expression of the individual is now understood only as the satisfaction of immediate desires, not as the reward for longer-term goals. More broadly, there seems to be a contradiction between the hedonistic worldview that emphasizes the immediate pleasure of the individual and the continuity and sustainability of society.

According to our research results, men (and women) with typical female values have children. Feminine-typical values are important for family formation. In the context of excessive market competition, social media offers seemingly endless competing lifestyle alternatives (Savelieva et al., 2023; Tammissalo & Rotkirch, 2022; Vignoli et al., 2020), a value orientation towards achievement, materialism and self-focus is reinforced. Hence, it is important to highlight that individuals who fit those values are likely to end up without children. In turn, valuing interpersonal relationships, caring and collaboration should be social endeavours if we want to promote fertility.

In light of these results, it can be stated that the incel culture and the new rise of misogyny (e.g. on social media platforms), which have received a lot of media attention in recent years, certainly do not

support family formation. Young men who care about family formation should be made aware of the harmfulness of these worldviews for family formation.

Proposals for action

1. Fundamentals of decision-making psychology.

Young people's identity formation as well as values, can only be influenced indirectly and at a structural level. In the research literature, it has been suggested, for example, that the fundamentals of decision-making psychology should be taught in schools, at least to older students. This would strengthen young people's cognitive abilities and understanding of making choices, tolerating uncertainty, and the rewards of commitment.

2. Societal literacy.

At the same time, young people should be taught societal literacy, for example, as part of social studies or other subjects (e.g. literature, mathematics). Basic sociological knowledge about how society shapes people and enables and limits thinking, values, and desires would protect young people from an erroneous and harmful perception of an individual's possibilities for self-fulfilment in life. This perception is harmful because it maintains a constant feeling of inadequacy: when we do not achieve something despite our will (e.g. status, happiness) or we are never ready (e.g. for a relationship, family life, etc.).

3. Equalizing educational attainment gaps and supporting boys' success in school.

Currently, boys are doing worse at school and women are overrepresented in higher education. The threat is that young men's values will become one-sided in a way that does not support family formation (i.e., higher male typicality). More must be demanded of boys, and, at the same time, success in school must be made something to aspire to for boys as well. More broadly, this is related to the recent discussion about

the decline in PISA results and standards at all levels of education in Finland.

4. Updating the images related to family formation.

Images of children and family formation would also need a broader "rebranding". The decline in the birth rate has gone a long way hand in hand with negative news coverage. Influencers and experts could be harnessed for discussion events or campaigns to tell and share information about the happiness and positive aspects of family life and to challenge harmful images. The public debate should highlight, for example, that it is possible to have a family despite uncertainties ("am I ready?") and overlapping life events and offer alternative views to those showing that "life ends when starting a family".

How were the studies conducted?

The connection between identity and family formation was studied using the Finnish FinEdu longitudinal survey data. Cohorts born in 1986 and 1988 have been followed from adolescence to the present day. We examined development between the ages of 23, 28, and 32.

The connection between male/female value typicality and having children was studied using the European Social Survey (ESS). The ESS is best conceived of as a panel of countries, whereby a sample of individuals from each country is surveyed at each wave (but not the same individuals). Samples come from almost all European countries from 2002 to 2022. The same data was used in the studies analyzing the gender gaps in values and examining the association between individual values and family formation.

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Financing

The research was funded by the Strategic Research Council (SRC) of the Academy of Finland (decision 345132, FLUX consortium).

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