VOLUNTARY CHILDLESSNESS IN THE LIGHT OF SOCIAL OPINION – AN ANALYSIS OF A POLISH SURVEY

Olga Smalej

Maria Curie-Sklodowska University, Plac Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 5, 20-031 Lublin, Poland

Abstract

Today, one can observe a growing number of people at procreation age who do not have children. There are many causes of this phenomenon, one of them being the increasing number of intentionally childless people in the totality of the population. The emergence of intentional childlessness was made possible by multifaceted changes which have taken place during the recent decades. Intentional childlessness is a very controversial phenomenon. People choosing to have no children oppose to fundamental cultural patterns and natural biological predisposition of human as a species. They do not intend to have children at all. Today, having a child is no longer obvious, but has become a part of the project which is an individual's life. Therefore, it seems extremely interesting to explore the public opinion on the phenomenon of intentional childlessness.

The aim of the present paper is to become acquainted with the public opinion concerning intentional childlessness in Poland. It is based on a quantitative research carried out in the first half of 2017.

Key words: *intentional childlessness, childlessness by choice, opinions on childless people, alternative forms of marital and family life*

1. INTRODUCTION – INTENTIONAL CHILDLESSNESS AS AN ALTERNATIVE FORM OF FAMILY LIFE

Among many social groups, family is the most fundamental for the human life. However, it is worth noting that the understanding of what a family is as well as the practices of family life vary. They are different in many cultural areas, and today they undergo particularly rapid transformations within one culture. Nowadays, in the Western culture, apart from the traditional pattern of a nuclear family understood as a marriage with children, there are so-called alternative forms of marital and family life. They include cohabitation partnerships, reconstructed families, homosexual unions, LATs, single parents, singles, and people childless by choice who will be discussed in the present paper. The intentionally childless are often referred to as DINK - Double (Dual) Income No Kids. In these relationships partners decide to live together without children. However, it is worth pointing out that the childless by choice often include also singles as well as cohabitants. This is why a more general term will be used in the present paper - intentional childlessness understood as a conscious decision of people at reproduction age not to have children. The text will also alternately use the term childlessness by choice or intended childlessness.

Nowadays, almost all European and American countries, including Poland, are experiencing an increase in the number of people at procreation age who do not have children (Agrillo & Nelini 2008). On the one hand, it is due to a large number of infertile and barren people, but on the other hand, we are dealing with intentional childlessness. The emergence of the possibility of choosing between having and not having children has enabled multi-faceted changes in recent decades, such as the improvement and popularization of contraceptives, the development of medicine, the feminist movement, the change of women's position and role in the society, changes in norms, values and lifestyles.

Determining the number of the intentional childless living in the society seems to be a difficult undertaking because the statistics include people who are intentionally childless (childfree) as well as childless not by their choice. In the literature, there is a common distinction between people who are childfree – they do not want to have children; childless – they do not have children but want to. However, a clear separation of these groups – childfree and childless seems impossible. This is

because it is often difficult to state where the coercion ends, and the free choice of the individual begins. For example, people who are single could have children if they found the right partner. It is also possible that pregnancy difficulties are explained or masked by the declaration of choosing childlessness or that people postpone the decision about the baby for an undetermined "later" which never happens. In such cases, is it possible to talk about free choice? Is it rather a weave of factors which results in the lack of children? In Poland, there are about 20-25% of childless marriages (intentionally or not), 6% of which are estimated to be childless by choice (Jarmolowska 2009). Data from the beginning of the 21st century indicates that in Europe in the demographic cohort of women born in the 1960s, childless people accounted for about 10% (in Spain, Norway and France), between 10 and 20% in the Netherlands, Ireland, Italy, Sweden and Belgium and over 20% in West Germany and Great Britain. At the same time in the USA 19% of women between 40 and 44 did not have children (Basten 2009).

2. MOTIVATIONS TO CHILDLESSNESS IN THE LIGHT OF THE ACTUAL RESEARCH

Research focusing on intentional childlessness has identified at least several factors which may be motivators to the decision not to have a child. In each individual case these motifs may be different or they may also constitute a whole conglomerate of factors which has resulted in the choice of a childless lifestyle. Often, the motivation for living without children is professional work or the realization of a passion, which in the opinion of the childless could be disturbed by the emergence of a child. Another reason for choosing childlessness may be the need for an egalitarian division of responsibilities between partners in a relationship whose harmony could be disturbed by the child. People childless by choice also point to the lack of a suitable partner with whom they could have a baby. Another very specific determinant may be aversion to pregnancy, childbirth and puerperal and perinatal changes which occur in the woman's body. Childless people often mention also freedom and reluctance to a stable lifestyle. The childless by choice may be also driven by comfort and unwillingness to bear parental responsibility. Economic reasons are also mentioned, such as the high cost of supporting a child, lack of housing conditions. Sometimes the statements of childfree people mention pro-ecological reasons connected with the concern for the planet and overpopulation. Traumatizing life experiences as well as bad national policies not conducive to procreation are also indicated as determinants of intentional childlessness. However, the most often, studies indicate lack of emotional need for having a child and being a parent (Slany 2002) & (Garncarek 2008) & (Wacławik 2012) & (Smalej 2014).

3. INTENTIONAL CHILDLESSNESS IN SOCIAL OPINION

Intentional childlessness is a very controversial phenomenon. Intentionally childless people oppose to fundamental cultural patterns and the natural biological predisposition of human as a species - they do not intend to have children in their lives. Once the undisputed and obvious sphere of human life, today it has entered the area of people's decision-making and some of them choose to resign from the role of a parent. Bogusława Budrowska writes: "Women who want to be normal (implicitly: all women) are obliged to be mothers, or have a 'motherhood order'." (Budrowska 2000). Other authors also note the social order of having children. As Stuart Basten states, childless couples have until recently been perceived to be in some way deviant, they were touched by the phenomenon of selective inattention. However, today, when they began to loudly manifest their lifestyle and their number began to grow (Basten 2009), they can no longer be marginalized.

The attitude of intentional childlessness can be difficult to accept, especially in religious societies, to which the Polish society belongs. It should be also stressed that the Polish society is highly traditional in terms of family life and having children. The family has been highly appreciated in the Poles' hierarchy of values for years, and happy family life is the goal which most people in Poland aspire to. (Boguszewski 2013). On the other hand, the fertility rate for Poland has been very low for ages and now accounts for 1.3 (The World Bank 2017). Therefore, it is justified and important to conduct research on alternative forms of marital and family life and the phenomenon of childlessness by

choice. The aim of the present paper is to get acquainted with the public opinion on intentional childlessness in Poland.

4. THE USED RESEARCH METHOD

The research was conducted by means of a quantitative method with the use of the CAWI (Computer-Assisted Web Interview) technique. The study took place at the turn of 2016 and 2017 in Poland, and was carried out via the Internet. The sample was chosen in a non-random manner, the selection was open. 403 respondents from 6 voivodeships in Poland took part in the survey. Only adults were examined. The gender composition of the sample was: 40.6% of men and 59.4% of women. 40.4% of respondents came from large cities, 23.3% from medium-sized cities, 17.8% from small towns, and 18.5% from rural areas. In addition, 64.6% were believers and practitioners, 16.6% were believers but not practicing, and 16% were nonbelievers. Respondents filled out a specially prepared, online questionnaire.

The following section of the present paper contains the analysis of the results obtained in the study.

The following analysis the phenomenon of intentional childlessness is verified, the opinion on the decision not to have a child is determined and the perception of people childless by choice is analyzed. This procedure was carried out deliberately, because the views of the respondents on the general phenomenon may differ from their attitude towards the people representing this particular lifestyle.

5. THE ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS OF THE RESEARCH

In the first part of the survey, the respondents were asked to express their views on the phenomenon of intentional childlessness. It appears that in relation to the phenomenon itself of childlessness by choice, which occurs in social life, the respondents expressed much understanding and acceptance.

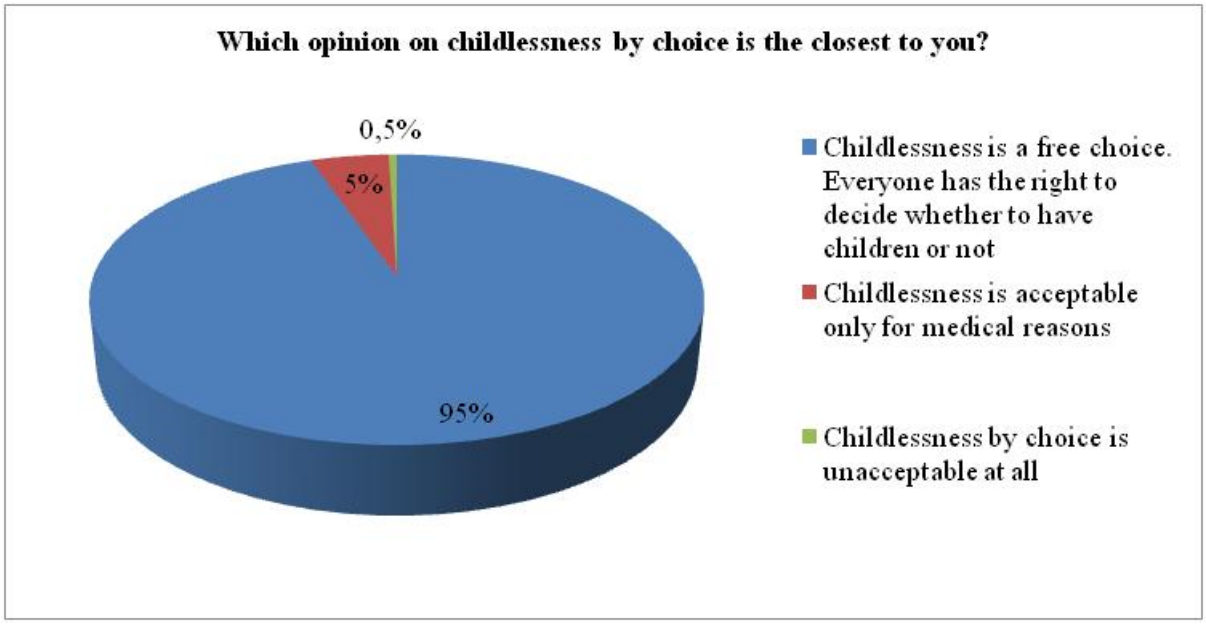


Chart 1. The respondents' opinion on childlessness by choice

Source: Own work

As much as 95% of the people answering to the question on their opinion about childlessness of choice answer that it is a free choice and everyone has the right to decide whether or not they want to have children. 5% of the surveyed declare that they consider childlessness to be acceptable only for medical reasons, and only 0.5% of the respondents represent an extreme position and consider childlessness by choice to be unacceptable at all.

The childless by choice lead a life which may seem at least incomprehensible, because for many a child is a synonym of happiness and the individual's sense of life of. Krystyna Slany, a Polish researcher of alternative forms of marital life, notes that childfree women are exposed to social pressure and are forced to change their decisions and have children. In their lives they often meet with lack of acceptance of their lifestyle (Slany 2002). Therefore, the respondents were next asked what they think about the decision of people who do not want to have children. The answers to this question are presented in Chart 2.

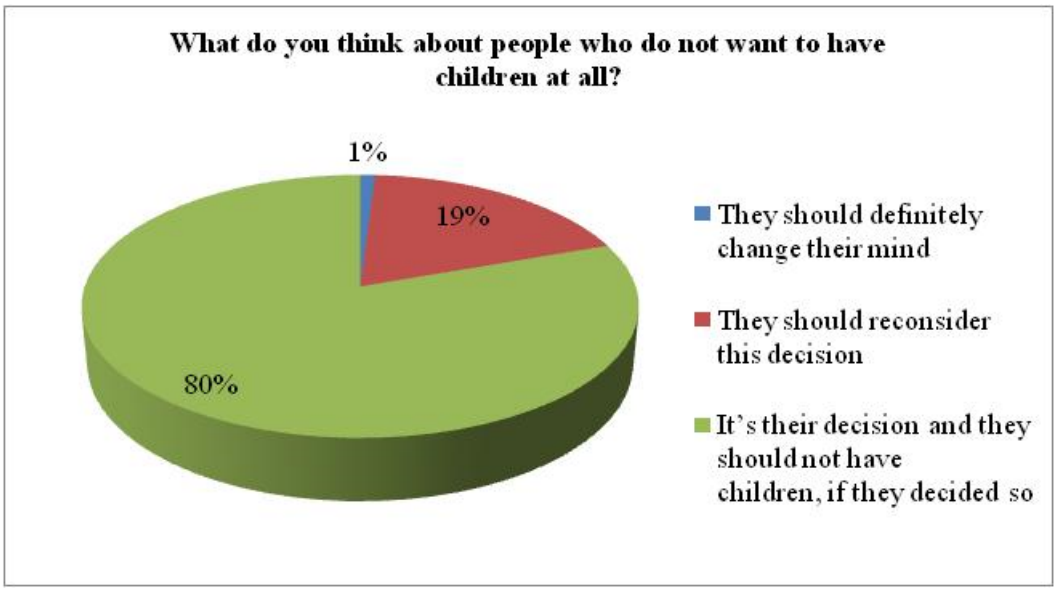


Chart 2. The respondents' view on the decision to be childless

Source: Own work

According to the data, 80% of the respondents think that it is the individual's decision and one decides not to have children, they should not have them. 19% of respondents advise to reconsider this decision, and only 1% believe that such people should definitely change their mind and have children.

The next part of the study focuses people themselves who lead a childfree lifestyle and presents the public opinion about them. Respondents were asked to answer the question whether they generally accept people childless by choice. The summary of responses is shown in Graph 3.

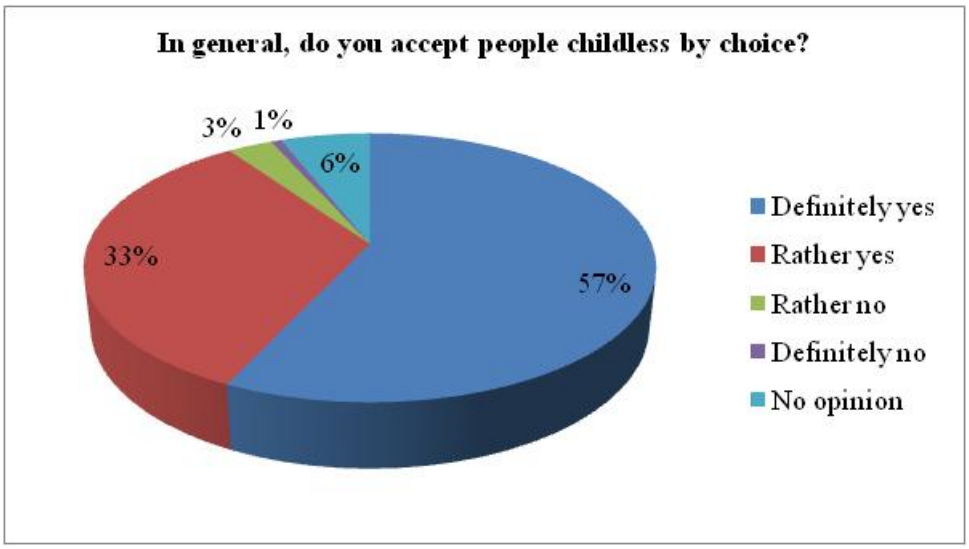


Chart 3. The acceptance of people childless by choice

Source: Own work

The study proves that 90% of the respondents accept people childless by choice. 57% of which definitely and 33% rather accept. 4% of the respondents declare that they do not accept such persons and 6% have no opinion on this issue. The high acceptance for intentionally childless people may be due to the currently prevailing culture of individualism, which gives the individual the ability of free choice and independent decisions in many spheres of life. In addition, the growth of secularization of societies also favors greater acceptance for once-undesirable or even reprehensible behaviors. In addition, the image promoted by mass media of childfree people as wealthy people of success, also promotes the approximation and taming of the phenomenon of intentional childlessness, as well as the positive image of childless people, and thereby the increase of their acceptance. Moreover, few people are aware of the potentially negative consequences of the growing number of anti-procreative attitudes which cause demographic low. Macro-scale consequences may result in a crisis of public finances stemming from the smaller number of taxpayers, the overloading of pension systems, or the economic stagnation resulting from the lack of employees, the reduction in consumption and, consequently, production (Cieślińska 2014).

Recently, some psychological clinics offers help to people who do not feel the need to have children. Respondents were asked for their opinion on such a form of psychotherapy.

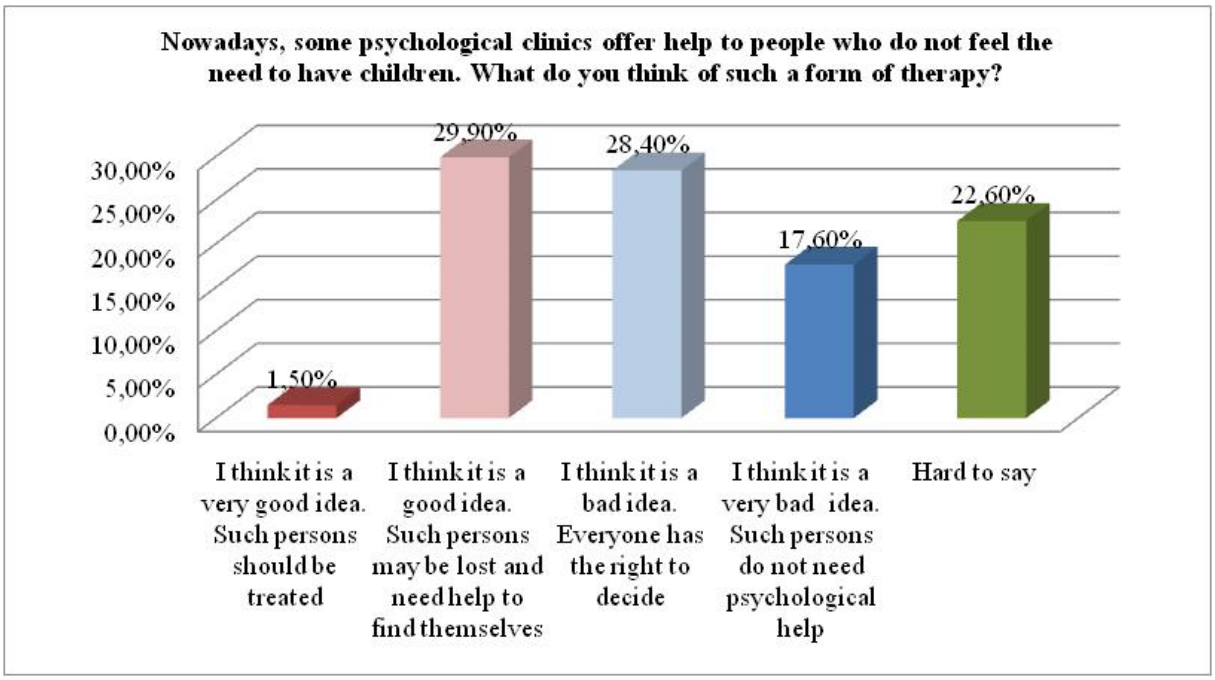


Chart 4. The opinion on the psychological help for intentionally childless people

Source: Own work

Since acceptance for intentional childlessness is so high, it would seem that psychotherapy is not needed. However, it appears that over 30% of respondents consider this form of therapy as very good or good idea. 28.4% consider this treatment a bad idea, and 17.6% declare that it is a very bad idea because the childless by choice do not require psychological help. Quite a large number of the surveyed - 22.6% have indicated the answer "Hard to say".

Then, in the next part of the study, the respondents were asked what they think are the characteristics of the childless by choice. They were presented with 6 qualities to choose from (3 positive - nobleness, thoughtfulness, rationality and 3 negative - coldness, egoism and vanity). The respondents could also indicate the answer "I do not know" or reject all the presented features.

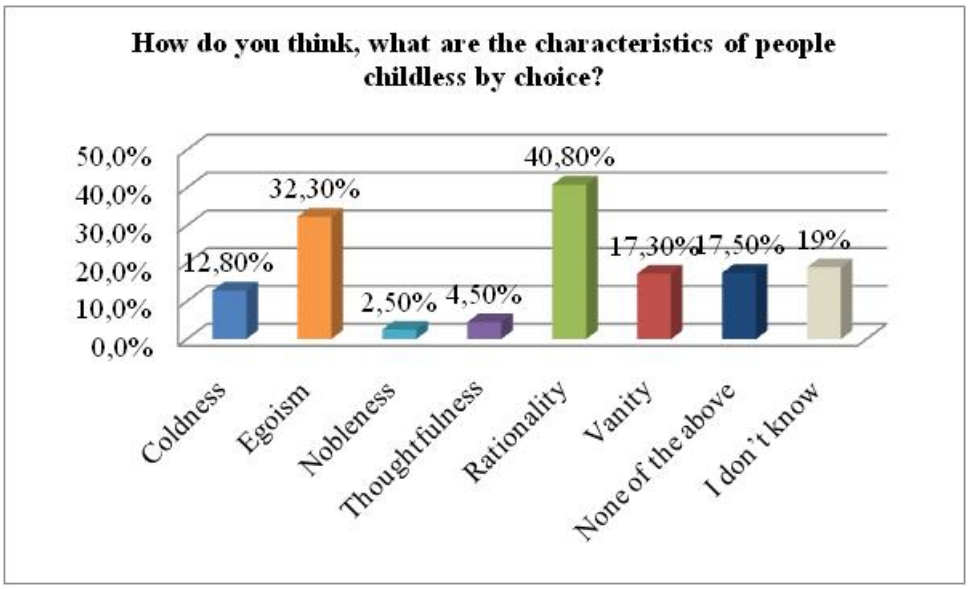


Chart 5. The characteristics of intentionally childless people in the opinion of the respondents (the results do not sum to 100%, because the respondents could choose more than one answer)

Source: Own work

The answer to this question seems quite interesting. The highest number of indications was received by rationality (40.8%). Secondly, the respondents were inclined to point to egoism as a characteristic of people childless by choice (32.3%). Subsequently, respondents indicated vanity (17.3%) and coldness (12.8%). Such qualities as nobleness and thoughtfulness were attributed to the childless sporadically. 17.5% of people rejected all features and 19% of respondents said "I do not know". Thus, it is clear from the survey that respondents are more likely to attribute to the childless people negative qualities (egoism, coldness, vanity) than positive ones (thoughtfulness, nobleness). These results correspond to other Polish studies on women childless by choice, which prove that they are perceived as unhappy, cold, selfish and unfulfilled (Ruszkiewicz 2015). Other Polish research shows that intentionally childless people are often attributed with reluctance and hostility towards children. This may be the reason of these unflattering opinions about people without children. However, it is worth underlining that the childless do not necessarily have aversion to children. Reality shows that they often help children from their environment, and are good aunts and uncles for their siblings' or friends' children (Slany 2002).

6. CONCLUSIONS AND DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The opinion polls conducted until now on intentional childlessness have shown that people who do not want to have children are perceived negatively. They are attributed such characteristics as immaturity, neuroticism, and egoism, while those who want to have a lot of children are associated with positive traits such as caring and affection (Basten 2009). In addition, the analyzes indicate the social stigmatization of childfree women and their overt discrimination at workplace (e.g. less favorable holiday dates, greater probability of transfer to another branch and priority for layoffs in case of redundancies) and in social life (e.g. biting comments directed at them) (Ruszkiewicz 2015). Thus, the feeling of discrimination is felt by at least some childless people. However, the opinion on childlessness is changing along with many social changes associated with the development of individualism and the heterogeneity of lifestyles. Childlessness, at least at the declarative level, seems to be an increasingly accepted phenomenon

The study presents a public opinion on the phenomenon of intentional childlessness, on the decision not to have a child and on the childless people themselves. The respondents define the phenomenon of

intentional childlessness as a free choice of the individual (95% of indications). However, asked about the decision not to have a baby is no longer so unanimous - 80% of them think it is an individual case of each individual, but 19% suggest rethinking such an attitude. As for the childfree themselves, 90% of the respondents declare their acceptance, but definite acceptance is indicated only by 57%. In addition, the childless by choice are attributed with rather negative characteristics, apart from thoughtfulness, they were associated with egoism, coldness and vanity. Therefore, it can be assumed that, with the refining of the examined issue, social acceptance decreases. It may be easier to accept the general phenomenon than people who actually represent a certain lifestyle.

The high level of acceptance for the intentionally childless demonstrated in the study seems to be even more surprising considering the level of acceptance of other alternative forms of family life, e.g. only 44% of Poles are willing to accept singles (Hiszp 2013).

As evidenced by the study described above, the acceptance of intentional childlessness is high, so is the social order to have children diminishing in the highly developed Western civilization? As K. Slany and I. Szczepaniak write, the process of socializing with intentional childlessness is ongoing, and the joy of having a child in postmodern societies is replaced by the joy of self-fulfillment and professional success (Slany & Szczepaniak 2003).

Considering the low birth rate, which almost all Europe (including Poland) suffers from for years, research on the phenomenon of intentional childlessness seems to be extremely important and necessary. Especially because the studies on childlessness by choice still have many threads which require exploration. Among them there are, for example, the analysis of the communities created by the childless by choice on the Internet, the analysis of the post-factum consequences of the decision of childlessness or so-called "grief analysis", as well as analyzes related to psychotherapy of the childfree (Basten 2009).

REFERENCES

Agrillo, C & Nelini, C 2008, 'Childfree by choice: a review', *Journal of Cultural Geography*, vol. 25, no. 3.

Basten, S 2009*, Voluntary childlessness and being Childfree*, The Future of Human Reproduction: Working Paper no. 5, OAW.

Boguszewski, R 2013, *Rodzina – jej współczesne znaczenie i rozumienie,* CBOS, Warszawa.

Budrowska, B 2000, *Macierzyństwo jako punkt zwrotny w życiu kobiety*, Wydawnictwo Funna, Wrocław.

Cieślińska, B 2014, 'Bezdzietność jako styl życia', *Pogranicze. Studia Społeczne.* vol. XXIV, pp. 277-292.

Garncarek, E 2008, 'Społeczne uwarunkowania dobrowolnej bezdzietności w opinii młodych bezdzietnych Polaków, in W Muszyński & E Sikora (ed.), *Miłość, wierność i uczciwość na rozstajach współczesności*, Wydawnictwo Adam Marszałek, Toruń, pp. 225-235.

Hiszp, N 2013, *Społeczne oceny alternatyw życia małżeńskiego,* CBOS, Warszawa.

Ruszkiewicz, D 2015, 'Negative Aspects of Nonrealization of Motherhood – Opinions and Sentiments of Childless Women', Family Pedagogy, no. 5(2), pp. 113-127.

Slany, K 2002, *Alternatywne formy życia małżeńsko-rodzinnego w ponowoczesnym świecie*, Nomos, Kraków.

Slany, K & Szczepaniak, I 2003, 'Fenomen dobrowolnej bezdzietności we współczesnych wysoko rozwiniętych społeczeństwach', *Małżeństwo i Rodzina,* no. 5, viewed 20 July 2017, <http://www.psychologia.edu.pl/czytelnia/58-maestwo-i-rodzina/674-fenomen-dobrowolnej-bezdzietnosci-we-wspolczesnych-wysoko-rozwinietych-spoleczenstwach.html>.

Smalej, O 2014, 'Bezdzietność jako styl życia', in A Borzęcki (ed.), *Higiena i środowisko a zdrowie człowieka*, Vol. 2, Wydawnictwo Norbertinum, Lublin 2014.

Szlendak, T 2010, *Socjologia rodziny*, PWN, Warszawa.

The World Bank 2017, *Fertility rate, total (births per woman)*, viewed 20 July 2017, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.DYN.TFRT.IN?>.

Wacławik, S 2012, 'W stronę społeczeństwa bez dzieci – przyczyny celowej bezdzietności', *PALIM PSEST*, no. 2, pp. 22-38.