

## **AMBIVALENCE IN CHILDBEARING ATTITUDES AND DESIRE FOR CHILDREN**

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### **Introduction**

The decision of whether to become a parent or not is one of the most engaging life choices we make and it often sparks a significant sense of uncertainty and hesitation. In this decision, not only the favorable aspects of childbearing are considered but also the numerous challenges it entails. Looking at 'both sides of the coin' seems a natural element of decision making, but if both positive and negative aspects are highly evaluated, a person might experience a state of ambivalence.

In the psychological literature, a clear distinction is made between two types of ambivalence. The first one is structural or objective ambivalence, and it stands for the sole coexistence of strong positive and negative attitudes towards an object. The second type, referred to as subjective ambivalence, signifies the conscious experience of inconsistent feelings as an internal struggle. This distinction is not commonly examined in studies related to reproductive choices, where ambivalence is typically defined as mixed feelings related to a possible pregnancy (Higgins et al., 2012; Sennot & Yeatman, 2018) or uncertainty in childbearing intentions (Schwarz et al., 2007).

In this study, we follow psychological literature and investigate how both structural and subjective ambivalence in attitudes towards parenthood are related to young people's desire to have a child and whether the effects are different for men and women.

### **Data and Measures**

Data for the study were collected in December 2022 and cover complete information about 831 childless young adults, aged 20-35 (520 women and 311 men). Respondents completed the Polish version of the Childbearing Questionnaire-Short Form (Huczewska, et al., 2022) which includes two separate scales to measure positive and negative attitudes towards parenthood and enables to capture structural ambivalence. Respondents' scores on the positive and negative dimensions allowed categorizing them into four categories:

- antinatal (attaching high value to negatives of childbearing only),
- pronatal (attaching high value only to positive aspects),
- ambivalent (focusing on both positive and negative aspects of childbearing), and
- indifferent (with low value attached to both positive and negative aspects).

The subjective ambivalence was measured with a 5-item scale, developed based on earlier studies on subjective ambivalence (Lipkus et al., 2001; Pinquart et al., 2010). Finally, childbearing desire was measured with the 3-item scale, which is a part of the Childbearing Questionnaire (Huczewska et al., 2022).

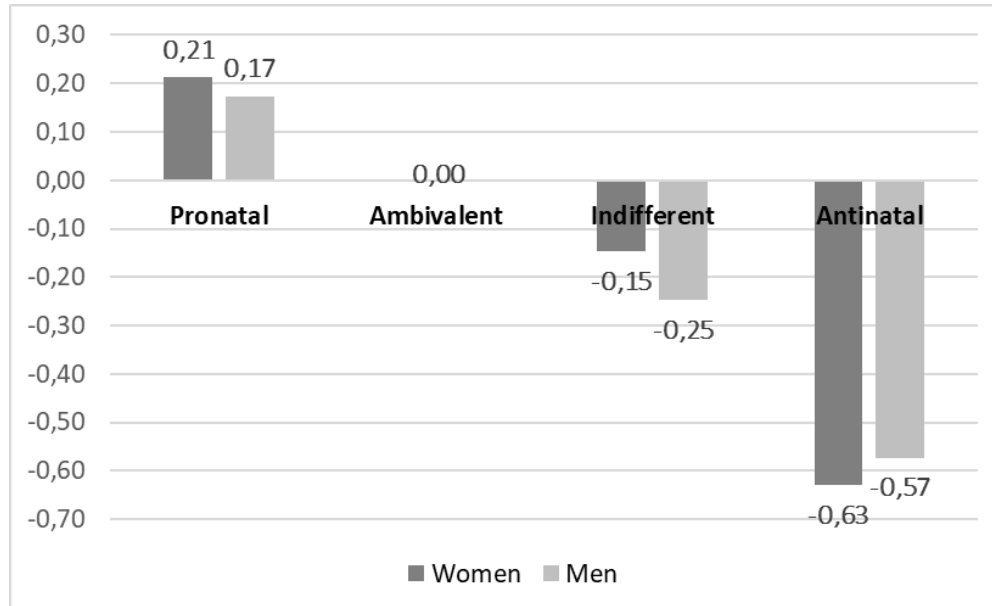
We run a series of multiple regression analyses with childbearing desire as our dependent variable and using different measures of ambivalence as explanatory variables. Analyses were performed separately for men and women.

### First Findings

The results of regression analyses showed that the relationship between structural ambivalence and childbearing desires is similar for both men and women. As shown in Figure 1, ambivalent individuals showed weaker childbearing desire compared to their pronatal counterparts, but significantly stronger than indifferent or antinatal respondents.

### Figure 1

*Regression analysis: Childbearing desire predicted by attitudes towards childbearing (categories entered as dummies)*

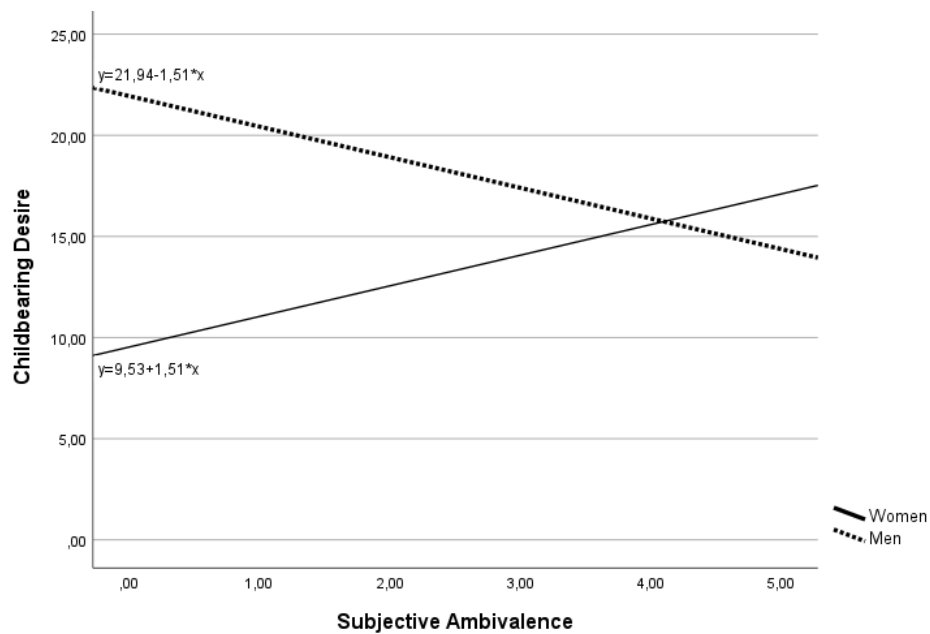


*Note.* Presented coefficients are standardized ( $\beta$ ). Ambivalence is a reference category. All values are significant at  $p < .001$ . Control variables: age, education, and marital status. Model parameters for women:  $F(7, 512) = 91.971$ ;  $p < .001$ ; adj.  $R^2 = .55$ . Model parameters for men:  $F(7, 303) = 38.957$ ;  $p < .001$ ; adj.  $R^2 = .46$ .

When subjective ambivalence was considered, the effects for men and women diverged. For women, the stronger inner conflict was related with a slightly elevated childbearing desire, while for men – with a decreased one. To illustrate these relationships, the model was computed for the whole sample with sex as a moderator. The results are presented in Figure 2.

**Figure 2**

*Moderation analysis. Childbearing desire predicted by subjective ambivalence in men and women*



These initial findings suggest that attaching high value to both the costs and benefits of childbearing may be an inherent component of reproductive decision-making for both men and women. However, the subjective experience of the conflict in attitudes towards parenthood and its relationship with childbearing desire is sex-dependent.

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