

## Structure of family relationships in family systems of spouses who do not take parent roles.

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### Summary

Early adulthood involves developmental tasks which are related to the fulfillment of professional and family roles. Parenting is an important area of development of each individual. Currently taking parental roles is increasingly deferred by young people, and the decision to be a parent is more often postponed. Research in the field of modern family often look for determinants of social roles of young adults in the quality of family relationships. The aim of the analyzes presented in the article was to find an answer to the question: what is the structure of relationships in family systems of spouses who do not take parent roles?

The research involved 170 young adults (between 25 and 40 years old), who are married for at least three years. 76 spouses not taking parental roles (the average marriage seniority in this group is 4,3 years, SD 1,7), 94 spouses who have at least one child (the average marriage seniority in this group is 6,6, SD 2,3). The following research tools were used in the study: the Survey questionnaire (developed by the authors) and the Family Rating Scale Faces IV-Sor [1]. On the basis of the conducted analyzes, it can be concluded that the family systems of young adults who do not take parent roles have their specificity and differ from the family systems of young adults who are parents. The research shows differences in the cohesion of family systems between marriages that postpone parenthood and those with children. At the same time, the results of the research have indicated the importance of gender for the diversity of respondents, both in terms of cohesion and the flexibility of family systems.

**family, parenthood, childlessness, early adulthood**

### INTRODUCTION

Modifications of family life has been subjects of research of sociologists, demographers and psychologists. Among them, development of alternative forms of family life [2-5] and changes in the area of parenthood, encompassing not taking parental tasks [6, 7,8,9,10,11] are very important. It is worth to emphasize, that the fam-

ily and having children occupy important places in the hierarchy of values of contemporary young Poles [12-15] The scale of not taking parental roles is a reasonable basis for conducting research in this area. Demographers report decrease in fertility rates both in the world and in Poland, an increase in the age of women at the time of the birth of the first child, as well as a reduction in the number of children in the family or more frequent childlessness [12, 16-20]. There are also significant gaps in research on not taking parental roles in married or cohabiting couples. Most studies focus on the determinants of individual procreation decisions (both external

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and psychological ones), not on the image of relationships between persons in relationships that do not undertake parental roles [6, 21-25]. Meanwhile, according to a few current studies, it can be expected that the functioning of these families has its own specificity [26].

Parenting is an important area of development of each individual at various stages of life [27-29]. In early adulthood most developmental tasks are related to the fulfillment of professional and family roles [30]. Currently taking parental roles is increasingly deferred by young people, and the decision to be a parent is no longer obvious [31-34]. The analysis of the phenomenon of not taking parental roles shows that this a complex phenomenon. According to previous literature, the motives of not taking parental roles by the pair are diverse [31, 35, 36, 37]. For some people it is the effect of an early decision on childlessness, which was assumed by one or both partners, in other cases it may arise from postponing of conception for later, due to a lack of favorable conditions to become parents or ambivalent attitude towards parenthood, ultimately applies to couples who, despite their earlier desires, abandon the decision on having offspring.

The dynamics of the family is influenced by the natural developmental processes that set the next stages of its life, and one of such turning points in the family biography is the appearance of a child [38, 39]. The family, as a system, is a relational and dynamic reality and its individuals interdepend on each other [40-42]. One of the suggestions for describing the family reality is the Olson Circumplex Model. It distinguishes three basic dimensions for the functioning of the family system: cohesion, flexibility, communication [1, 43-45]. Coherence is understood by the authors of the model as 'emotional bond between family members' [1, p. 12]. It describes relationships between persons in the family and the level of their individual autonomy. Flexibility is understood as 'the quality and the degree of changes in the systems related to leadership, roles and rules of mutual relations, and resulting from negotiating processes between family members' [1, p. 12]. Communication is understood as an ability to 'communicate positively (...) in a given system' [45, p. 24]. This model is the theoretical background for the conducted study.

## AIMS

Using the Olson Circumplex Model as a basis of this research project allowed the main question to be asked: are there differences in the rating of functioning of the family in young adults not taking parental roles and young adults who are parents?

Detailed questions related to the differences both between the marriages from the study groups and the individual results of women and men were formed respectively for each dimension.

Q. 1a. Are there differences in the coherence of the family systems between marriages not taking parental roles and marriages with children?

Q. 1b. Are there differences in the coherence of family systems between women and men in the study groups?

Q. 2a. Are there differences in the flexibility of family systems between marriages from the study groups?

Q. 2b. Are there differences in the flexibility of family systems between women and men in the study groups?

Q. 3a. Are there differences in communication in family systems between marriages from the study groups?

Q. 3b. Are there differences in communication in family systems between women and men in the study groups?

The following differentiating hypothesis were raised for each question:

H. 1a. There are differences in the cohesion of family systems between marriages not taking parental roles and marriages with children.

H. 1b. There are differences in the cohesion of family systems between women and men in the study groups.

H. 2a. There are differences in the flexibility of family systems between marriages from the study groups.

H. 2b. There are differences in the flexibility of family systems between men and women in the study groups.

H. 3a. There are differences in communication in family systems between marriages from the study groups.

H. 3b. There are differences in communication in family systems between men and women in the study groups.

## MATERIALS AND METHOD

The following research tools were used in the study: the Survey questionnaire (developed by the authors) and the Family Rating Scale Faces IV-Sor [1],

The Survey questionnaire consists of two parts. The first part includes questions related to sociodemographic characteristics of the subjects, such as gender, origin, education, religion, material status, professional activity. The second part includes questions related to the parenting area and collects data such as having children, possibility of having children, planned time of conception, reasons for postponing parenthood, used contraceptives.

The Faces IV-Sor is based on the aforementioned Olson Circumplex Model, in which the family reality is described in three dimensions: cohesion, flexibility, communication [43, 44]. Three scales of dimensions of cohesion and flexibility are distinguished in this model. Scales of dimensions of cohesion are as follows: Disengagement, Balanced cohesion and Enmeshment, while scales of dimensions of flexibility include: Rigidity, Balanced flexibility, and Chaoticness. In addition, for each of these two dimensions it is possible to calculate the Cohesion Coefficient and the Flexibility Coefficient. The third proposed dimension is communication, which is auxiliary to the previous two, and its high level characterizes well-functioning family systems. The reliability coefficients of the questionnaire scales (Cronbach's alpha) range from 0.70 to 0.93 [1].

### Sample

Research has been carried out in Poland, where significant changes in the family area are currently being observed. The study included 170 people aged 25–40 years, married for at least three years<sup>1</sup>. The criterial group included spouses not taking parental roles (76 people). The inclusion criteria were as follows: childlessness and postponing conception for at least one year, taking steps to gain protection from unwanted pregnancy, no biological obstacles to

conception. At the time of the survey, the spouses did not have children and declared that they did not want to have them at that time. When asked about time in which children would appear in their marriage, the most frequent answer was "in two years time" (44.8% of respondents), followed by "in three years time" (23.9% of respondents) and "within the next year" (13.4% of respondents). 6% of respondents would like to postpone parenting for four years, and almost 12% of respondents would like to wait for five and more years. The control group consisted of 94 people, spouses with at least one child.

One of the survey questions was the reasons why respondents postpone parenting. It was possible to choose more than one answer. The respondents most often stated that the reason why they do not want to have children is the lack of reconciliation of childcare with work. This answer was given by 40.8% of childless spouses. Another frequently chosen answer was the lack of readiness to take on the role of a parent. 34.2% of respondents stated: "I am not ready". The respondents pointed out the financial and housing conditions at their disposal as an important argument for postponing parenthood. The poor financial situation was marked by 17.1% of respondents and housing conditions 21.1% of respondents. The answer indicated by almost every fifth respondent (18.4%) was: "I want more time for myself".

The collected socio-demographic data of the respondents allowed to characterize the surveyed groups in terms of: origin, education, religiosity, material conditions and professional activity of the respondents. The study groups did not differ in these ranges, the only difference that occurred between the study groups was diversity in religiousness. The characteristics of the examined criterion and control group in terms of these characteristics will be presented below.

The respondents from childless marriages most often came from the countryside (33.3%), as did the spouses who are parents (38.3%). The second most represented group were people living in medium-sized cities (29.3% for married children and 28.7% of spouses with children).

<sup>1</sup> The couple must have been married for at least three years, according to the theory of Duvall [46], which defines the first two years of marriage as *marriage without a child*, another year is added due to time which is deemed necessary for diagnosis of infertility

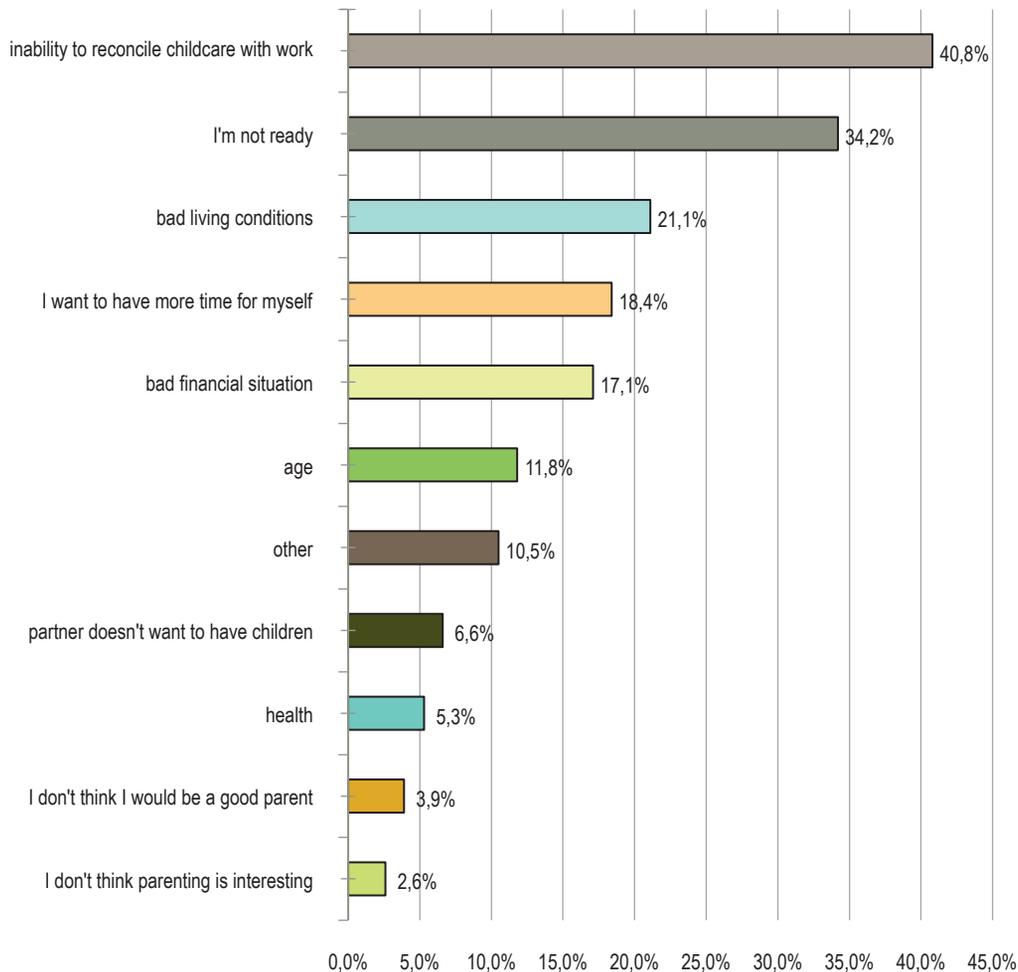


Figure 1. Chart of the study group criterion by reason of not taking parental tasks.

The surveyed people from both groups most often had higher education (62.8% of children and 59.2% of those without children). Only two people from the criterion group and two people from the control group had basic education.

The surveyed people from marriages with children most often (69.1%) declared themselves to be believers, while among those with childless marriages, it is 59.2%. Spouses without children (6.6%) more often than people from marriages with children (0.0%) declared themselves unbelieving, and more often declared their indifference in religious matters (10.5% to 2.1%). On the other hand, childless spouses more often declared themselves as deeply religious (21.3% of those with child marriages, 9.2% of those without children). Declared religiosity is the only socio-demographic variable that differentiates the studied groups. The Chi-square test ( $\chi^2(4) = 19.502$ ,  $p = 0.001$ ,  $V$  Kramer 0.334) indicates a weak correlation between undertaking parental tasks and religiosity.

When asked about the material conditions, the respondents most often (44.7% for childless spouses and 43.6% for spouses with children) declare that they are rather good. The often chosen answer was also the definition of material conditions as "good" (38.2% in persons from the criterion group and 43.6% in the control group). None of the respondents described their material conditions as "bad" or "rather bad".

The respondents most often declared that they are professionally active (83% of spouses having children and 93.4% without children)

## RESULTS

The analysis of variance Anova with repeated measurements for dependent samples was performed to compare the results between marriages not taking parental roles and marriages having children. It was verified whether there are

interactions between the differences in the results in the dimensions between wife and husband in each marriage, and whether there is a difference between marriages with and without children, regardless of spouses' gender. Subsequently, the differences between the results of men and women from the study groups were calculated using the Student's t-test, which allowed for analyzing differences between women from both groups, men from both groups, and between women and men within each group.

The results of analyzes of results obtained by the respondents in the dimension of cohesion indicate the existence of significant differences in the examined area, both between marriages as well as between men and women. Table 1 presents the average answers of respondents in individual groups on the scales of dimension of cohesion and in the Cohesion Coefficient disaggregated by gender.

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics for the dimension of cohesion disaggregated by gender and study group

Dimension of cohesion	Marriages without children (N=76)				Marriages with children (N=94)			
	Female (N=38)		Male (N=38)		Female (N=47)		Male (N=47)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Balanced cohesion	30.09	3.83	29.76	4.08	30.17	3.73	30.52	3.31
Disengagement	11.45	3.97	13.16	4.09	11.06	4.60	10.83	3.13
Enmeshment	13.21	3.84	14.39	3.93	13.06	4.73	13.81	4.86
Cohesion Coefficient	2.65	0.86	2.31	0.72	2.76	0.89	2.67	0.82

The analysis of variance Anova with repeated measurements for dependent samples shows one significant interaction when comparing the results obtained by marriages in particular groups (Table 2). The interaction is observed

( $F(1; 83) = 4.147; p = 0.044$ ) for the disengagement variable. The marriages not taking parental roles are characterized by a higher disengagement rate than marriages with children.

**Table 2.** Results of the analysis of variance Anova with repeated measurements in the dimension of cohesion

Dependent variable	Marriage x having children	Marriage	Having children
Balanced cohesion	$F(1;83)=0.680; p=0.412$	$F(1;83)=0.001; p=0.982$	$F(1;83)=0.352; p=0.554$
Disengagement	$F(1;83)=4.147; p=0.044$	$F(1;83)=2.391; p=0.126$	$F(1;83)=3.502; p=0.064$
Enmeshment	$F(1;83)=0.140; p=0.710$	$F(1;83)=2.689; p=0.105$	$F(1;83)=0.232; p=0.632$
Cohesion Coefficient	$F(1;83)=1.780; p=0.186$	$F(1;83)=5.782; p=0.018$	$F(1;83)=2.239; p=0.138$

*Note:* Marriage (Differences between man and woman in the couple). Having children (Differences between marriages with and without children regardless of gender).

There are significant differences on the Disengagement Scale and in the Cohesion Coefficient. In terms of cohesion, men from childless marriages obtained statistically significantly ( $t(83) = 2.9732; p = 0.004$ ) higher scores on the Disengagement Scale (mean = 13.16) than men from

marriages with children (mean = 10.83). In addition, at the level of statistical trend ( $t(74) = -1.838; p = 0.068$ ) men from childless marriages obtained higher scores (mean = 13.16) than women from childless marriages (mean = 11.45).

**Table 3.** Student's t-test statistics of differences between individuals disaggregated by gender and study group for the dimension of cohesion

Dimension of cohesion	Student's t-test statistics of differences between different pairs											
	Men with children – Women with children			Men without children – Women without children			Men without children – Men with children			Women with children – Women without children		
	<i>t</i>	<i>Df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Balanced cohesion</b>	-0.477	92	0.634	0.361	74	0.719	-0.941	83	0.350	-0.096	83	0.924
<b>Disengagement</b>	0.288	92	0.774	-1.850	74	0.068	<b>2.973</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>0.004</b>	0.406	83	0.686
<b>Enmeshment</b>	-0.753	92	0.453	-1.330	74	0.188	0.602	83	0.549	0.154	83	0.878
<b>Cohesion Coefficient</b>	0.545	92	0.587	1.838	74	0.070	<b>-2.093</b>	<b>83</b>	<b>0.039</b>	-0.602	83	0.549

Differences in the Cohesion Coefficient are statistically significant ( $t(83) = -2.093, p = 0.039$ ) between men from marriages not taking parental roles (mean = 2.31) and men with children (mean = 2.67). The Cohesion Coefficient of family systems of men from marriages that do not take parental roles is significantly lower than the Cohesion Coefficient of the family systems of men from marriages with children. At the level of statistical trend ( $t(74) = 1.838, p = 0.070$ ), the Cohesion Coefficient of childless men (mean = 2.31) is also lower than the Cohesion Coefficient of family systems of women from childless marriages (mean = 2.65).

The analyses confirmed significant differences between women and men from the study groups

in terms of the dimension of cohesion of family system. Differences occur between men who do not take parental roles, and those who have children, as well as between men and women in the group of spouses who do not take parental roles.

Analyzes of results obtained by the respondents in the dimension of flexibility did not confirm the hypothesis about the existence of differences in this respect between the surveyed marriages, however, they confirmed the hypothesis about the existence of differences between women and men from the study groups. Table 4 presents the average results obtained on the dimension of flexibility scales by respondents from each group, disaggregated by sex.

**Table 4.** Statistics of dimension of flexibility disaggregated by sex and study group

Dimension of flexibility	Marriage without children (N=76)				Marriage with children (N=94)			
	Female (N=38)		Male (N=38)		Female (N=47)		Male (N=47)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Balanced flexibility</b>	25.63	4.16	24.89	3.99	27.19	3.84	27.00	4.49
<b>Rigidity</b>	17.58	3.85	18.21	4.77	19.40	4.58	20.11	4.52
<b>Chaoticness</b>	16.53	4.77	17.32	4.29	16.11	5.31	15.55	4.73
<b>Flexibility Coefficient</b>	1.57	0.48	1.46	0.39	1.60	0.41	1.55	0.34

First, it was verified whether childless marriages statistically significantly differed in terms of the variable in question from marriages with children. The obtained results of the analysis of variance did not show the existence of significant differences between the results of marriages from both groups. Next, it was verified whether there were differences between women and men with and without children and whether

men with children differed from childless men and women with children differed from childless women. The analysis of differences between women and men in each group and between them points to significant differences between the respondents on the Balanced flexibility Scale, as well as differences at the level of statistical trend on the Rigidity and Chaoticness scales (Table 5)

**Table 5.** Student's t-test statistics for the dimension of flexibility, disaggregated by gender and study group

Dimension of flexibility	Student's t-test statistics of differences between couples											
	Men with children – Women with children			Men without children – Women without children			Men without children – Men with children			Women with children – Women without children		
	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Balanced flexibility	0.222	92	0.825	0.788	74	0.433	-2.257	83	0.027	-1.793	83	0.077
Rigidity	-0.749	92	0.456	-0.635	74	0.527	-1.877	83	0.064	-1.960	83	0.053
Chaoticness	0.534	92	0.595	-0.758	74	0.451	1.780	83	0.079	0.379	83	0.706
Flexibility Coefficient	0.694	92	0.489	1.117	74	0.268	-1.136	83	0.259	-0.338	83	0.736

On the Balanced flexibility scale, men from marriages not taking parental roles obtained statistically significantly ( $t(83) = -2.257, p = 0.027$ ) lower scores (mean = 24.89) than men from marriages with children (mean = 27.19). The results obtained on this scale by women from childless marriages (mean 25.63) differed from the results obtained by women from marriages with children (mean 27.19) at the level of statistical trend ( $t(83) = -1.793, p = 0.077$ ),

The differences on the scales of Unbalance: Rigidity and Chaoticness are also at the level of statistical trend. Rigidity is the extreme pole of flexibility and it determines the area of unbalance within the readiness to make changes. On the Rigidity scale, childless men (mean = 18.21) obtained lower scores than men with children (mean = 20.31) at the significance

level  $p = 0.064$  and  $t(83) = -1.877$ . Childless women (mean = 17.58) obtained lower scores than women with children (mean = 19.40) at the significance level  $t(83) = -1.960$ , and  $p = 0.053$ .

The second pole of the dimension of flexibility is chaoticness. On the Chaoticness scale, childless men (mean = 17.32) obtained higher scores than men with children (mean = 15.55) at the level of statistical trend  $t(83) = 1.780$ , with  $p = 0.079$ .

Analysis of the results in the dimension of communication did not confirm any hypothesis about the occurrence of differences – neither between marriages from the two study groups, nor between women and men in groups with children and without children, nor between men in each group, and women in each group. The distribution of respondents' answers is presented in Table 6. and in Table 7.

**Table 6.** Descriptive statistics of dimension of communication, disaggregated by gender and study group

Dimension of communication	Marriage without children (N=76)				Marriage with children (N=94)			
	Female (N=38)		Male (N=38)		Female (N=47)		Male (N=47)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Communication	42.95	5.55	42.34	5.82	41.36	8.08	42.77	5.96

**Table 7.** Student's t-test statistics of differences in the dimension of communication between individuals disaggregated by sex and study group

Dimension of communication	Student's t-test statistics of differences between different pairs											
	Men with children – Women with children			Men without children – Men without children			Men without children – Men with children			Women with children – Women without children		
	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>P</i>	<i>T</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>t</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Communication	-0.959	92	0.340	0.464	74	0.644	-0.329	83	0.743	1.029	83	0.306

## DISCUSSION

The obtained results confirmed the existence of differences between family systems of spouses who do not take parental roles and who have children in terms of cohesion and flexibility of family systems. The dimension of cohesion is the only variable that distinguishes the results of marriages in both study groups, the remaining differences concern the individual results of men and women compared within the group and between groups (men with and without children, women with and without children, childless men and childless women, men and women with children).

Marriages without children obtained significantly higher scores on the Disengagement scale, which is one of three scales of the dimension of cohesion. A detailed analysis of the respondents' answers shows that men from marriages without children show a significantly higher level of disengagement in comparison to both their spouses and spouses from families with children. Also the Cohesion Coefficient of childless men is lower than the result of men being fathers, and also lower than the result of women from the same group. This result may indicate a lack of emotional closeness in family relations felt by childless men. At the same time, it seems important to draw attention to the difference that may result from gender, because previous research has pointed to other social standards for childless men and women [47,48,49]. This opens the way to further research in the field of temporary or permanent voluntary childlessness.

The dimension of flexibility differentiated the studied women and men from both groups on the scales of Balanced flexibility. Spouses without children obtained lower scores on the Balanced flexibility scale than the spouses in the control group. These results may signal that both childless men and women are characterized by a lower willingness to introduce changes in the family system

Researchers point out that temporary or permanent voluntary childlessness can be a source of tensions in the married couple. They can be associated with stopping the dynamics of the development of the family system and difficulties in functioning in the prolonged phase of marriage without children [38]. Or they also may re-

sult from having to cope with social pressure in the whole process of becoming and being childless by choice [26]. Therefore it seems important to conduct further research in this area.

The presented results can therefore be applied in psychological practice, however, it should be remembered that there is no single template and pattern of fulfilling parental roles. It is worth noting that the research covered only a group of married couples, in subsequent research projects it seems justifiable to expand the study group by couples living in informal relationships because researchers suggest that cohabitation is now one of the alternatives to family formation [50].

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