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Investment in the family: is it beneficial in post-modern society?

Abstract

We observe very deep changes involving the family. People live in different kinds of partnerships, not only in traditional marriages. They decide to have fewer children or even not have them at all. So is the family still beneficial in post-modern society? This article discusses the contemporary determinant conditions regarding the decision to start a family. The majority of them are connected with the labour market and social processes like individualisation, changing social ties, and decaying of cultural universe. The post-modern society does not encourage people to start families. However, people still decide to have children and to form stable partnerships. This is because having offspring and a partner will give them something of the highest importance that is invaluable in post-modern society – emotional ties and emotional fulfilment.

Keywords: family formation, post-modern society, emotional fulfilment, precariat, family ties

Introduction

The family is present in all cultures and societies that we know. Because of the role it plays in the reproduction and existence of social life, it is metaphorically called the original cell of social life. It is the only social system reproducing people, goods and symbols (Giza-Poleszczuk, 2005). The family is extremely important not only for the society but also for individuals. Family life comes down to coordinated actions of its participants that make up everyday practices. It is based on a personal bond that links family members into a complex system of mutual obligations and dependencies. It is this bond that makes a family a major source of help and support and a community that gives its members a sense of belonging, material security, protection and proper order of life. It is hard to overestimate the benefits of living a family, both for the whole society and individuals. Belonging to a family, however, comes with a price as its members are required to make investments and surrender some of their freedom. Recently, a decreasing interest in family life has been noted in Poland. The number of marriages and births declines, while of divorces and informal relationships increases. The balance of marriages entered into and broken down is negative (GUS, 2019). Intimate relationships take very different forms and the desire to become a parent can, thanks to sperm banks and in vitro technology, be satisfied outside of a relationship and even, although theoretically, without having sex life. Post-modernity greatly changes the conditions in which individuals make decisions to have children and engage in civil partnerships. Does it change them to such an extent that investment in a family is no longer beneficial?

Social variability of reproductive conditions and starting a family

It is difficult to clearly determine to what extent the desire to have children is the result of a natural, biological imperative; after all, not everyone wants to become a parent. It is not difficult to see that this desire is subject to social regulations. Society sustains pressure on having children or on giving them up and determines the conditions under which this aspiration can be fulfilled as well as the procreation partner eligibility range. In any case, procreation is not simply a consequence of desires of individuals. It is a part of social life and its order.

Procreation requires cooperation, while children require resources necessary to raise them. Providing the basic necessities to family members is one of its fundamental

functions. Therefore, its shape is to a great extent a consequence of the form of economy that dominates in a given society and in a given period. In the pre-industrial era, it was farming, and tilling the soil that provided material resources for survival. The land and buildings not only provided livelihood but they were also a source of power, prestige and other privileges determining social status of an individual. The farmland cannot be moved to another place, its division reduces its value, therefore, family members were somehow assigned to it, and their life revolved around it. A household was the basis for the existence and duration of the family. Therefore, until the 19th century, the term *family* was not widely used, it referred only to the poor. The family, according to the French and English Royal Dictionary, is all those who “live in one house, under the same head” (Flandrin, 1998, 9). In such a model, a married couple and children were only a part of the strategy of continuance and strengthening the family. They were, however, a crucial part because children ensured the family name continuity and could be married into other families to multiply or at least keep the assets. Getting married could not be a matter of only two people; it was a matter of the whole extended family. Marriage tied not so much individuals as it tied groups – clans, families, households represented by spouses-to-be. Children were primarily an economic and social asset, ensuring the continuity of family lineage. Their birth was a matter of almost life and death, a matter of survival, a matter of providing a successor capable of taking over both material and symbolic goods. Procreation decisions were made not by future parents; they constituted rather an obligation towards the family. The pressure to meet this obligation was clear and extremely strong. The marriage was entered into not for the emotional satisfaction of the couple but for the sake of future parenthood (Duby, 2005). The ‘I’ of an individual was melted with the ‘we’ of the group of which this individual was a member (Elias, 2008). Its social and individual identity was determined by the family membership. The system of family dependencies and commitments effectively protected the members and gave them not only identity or social status but also provided care and means of support. It was difficult for people to function outside of their clan. The family prepared its members for their future life and their position in the literal sense. Children would gain the knowledge and skills necessary to live an adult life, including the skills allowing them to provide necessities to either their own or other family. Apprenticeship meant living with a teacher and performing duties related not only to the future profession (Duby, 2005).

Farmland as the basic asset required hands to work. The industry introduced hired labour as a source of income, thus causing a split between family life and work. In other words, in the industrial society production was separated from consumption (Toffler, 1997). This was of great relevance to the shape of family life because a clear

division was made into professional work, which was performed by men and was paid, and unpaid housework assigned to women. “The assignment of roles related to sex is the *basis* of industrial society (...). Without the division into female and male roles (...) there would be no industrial society with its division into work and life” (Beck, 2002, p. 163). The basic role of a woman was the role of a mother; she was also responsible for the organisation of family life and home space management. A man was responsible for supporting the family and its social status and had a full authority over the family. In order to fulfil his obligation, a man would leave the house, he would be absent most of the day, and the house was a place of rest for him rather than a space for taking action that would allow him to gain a social status. A woman and a man needed each other, performing mutually complementary roles. A decision to start a family, therefore, appeared as a normal course of events, while living outside of it exposed an individual to a risk of being labelled as someone who did not have enough qualities to find a partner ready to raise children together and share the hardships of life. Marriage ceased to be a matter decided by an extended family, the importance of intimate relationship as the basis of marriage increased, nevertheless, establishing a family remained a natural life choice.

The position of children changed very clearly at that time. They remained the subject of investment as heirs, the future of the family. And it made them a precious asset. Michelle Perrot quotes Stendhal saying about his father: “He did not love me as a person but as a son to extend his family” (Perrot, 2006, p. 163). But third parties, such as doctors, philanthropists, state bodies, came in wishing to protect and educate children. Offspring belonged not only to the family, but also to the nation and the state (Perrot, 2006). Industrial society compared to feudal meant a change in all dimensions of social life.

Conditions for family relationships in post-modern society

The present time creates different conditions for having a family than those from the immediate past. These conditions, however, differ from the industrial society conditions as enormously as the latter differed from the feudal society conditions. The economic sphere – related to having a source of livelihood necessary to provide family members with assets that would allow them to perform their tasks – changed first and foremost. According to Manuel Castells, the dominant processes characterising current economy are efficiency and competitiveness. Faster-than-ever technological progress deeply transforms the nature of work and the organisation of production. “The restructuring of companies and organisations, induced by information technology and stimulated

by global competition, leads to a deep transformation of work: *individualisation of work in the work process*” (Castells, 2013, p. 283). This transformation is noted for the lack of a specific framework setting the working time: employees are task-oriented but when a task is done, their employment contract does not have to be extended; some tasks are performed outside the company; employers depart from traditional model based on a social contract between an employer and an employee with mutual obligations; employees are no longer attached to their companies, hence they are unable to predict their careers. This leads to the formation of what is known as flexible labour market (Castells, 2013). One of its basic features is a departure from an employment contract for an indefinite period of time. It is replaced by various forms of contracts, such as for a definite period of time (fixed time contracts) or for the performance of a specific work. It is very difficult to determine what percentage of people working in Poland are employed based on this type of contract. According to estimates provided by the CSO, it might have been approx. one million in 2014. “For about 2/3 of this group of employees, this type of work was the main, and for the vast majority – the only paid work at that time. For the straight majority of people, performance of work based on such contracts was not their choice” (GUS, 2016, p. 8). This mainly concerned young people entering the labour market and older people. A flexible labour market means unstable and unpredictable sources of income for individuals and thus, also for their potential families.

The paid work itself, which was and still is the basic source of income, is changing significantly. This transformation is defined as the process of work dematerialisation. “(...) in modern economies, work is more and more often revolving not so much around the production of goods (although they still constitute a substantial part of its final products), but rather around abstracts and ideas” (Marody & Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004, p. 251). This means that a completely different kind of skills and commitment are required. “The basic areas of work dematerialisation are, therefore, actions related to the management of »human resources« on the one hand, and marketing on the other” (Marody & Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004, p. 252). This directly affects the expectations that employees must fulfil as well as their position on the labour market. Professionals managing people, creating ideas and values that drive sales have relatively stable work and high earnings, but in return they must be fully available and involved in what they do. Having a family, which also requires time and commitment, does not make it easier to meet such expectations. In this situation, engaging in work and family to the same extent is extremely difficult. Simultaneously, the lack of proper commitment may result in losing a job on the one hand, and a family breakup on the other. Other full-time workers no longer have job security as they can be replaced at any time by machines or by someone else ready to work at a lower wage. The number of people

performing what is known as McJob, i.e., a low-paid, low-prestige dead-end job that requires few skills and offers very little chance of intracompany advancement, is growing. This leads to a situation where “millions of people are (...) constantly being taken in and dismissed from paid work, they are often involved in informal doings in criminal economy establishments. What is more, the loss of stable employment and the weak bargaining power of many employees lead to major crises in the lives of their families: temporary unemployment, personal crises, diseases, drug and alcohol addiction, loss of ability to work, loss of assets, loss of credit” (Castells, 2009, p. 344). A new category has emerged. Guy Standing has called it *the precariat*: it includes people suffering from many uncertainties related to work: security in the labour market, employment, workplace, work, reproduction, skills, income and representation. Job and income insecurity go hand in hand with anxiety and lack of professional identity. A constant sense of danger causes anger, anomie, anxiety and alienation. According to Standing, this directly affects readiness, or rather the lack thereof, to build permanent relationships and start a family. “In a flexible labour market, individuals fear making or being locked into long-term behavioural commitments, since they may involve costs and actions that could not be subject to desirable reciprocities. The young will not wish to be tied by economic commitments to their parents if they fear they might have to support them long into old age, with a shrinking state and increasing longevity raising the prospective costs of doing so. The withering of an intergenerational bargain is matched by more contingent sexual and friendship relationships” (Standing, 2014, pp. 69–70).

Uncertainty and lack of stability are not attributed only to the labour market. They become one of the permanent features of contemporary social reality and its individual dimensions. Social ties become unstable, they are based on a contract between equal and free individuals, and not on the complementarity of their actions or mutual dependencies and obligations supported by an internalised sense of duty. Such a bond was the essence of the family and lay at the heart of family solidarity, built around common tasks (Beck-Gernshaim, 1998). A contract means an equivalent exchange and limited obligations and may be terminated at any time (Marody & Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004). Close, emotionally engaging relationships only bind individuals for some time and as the related perks are exhausted, such relationships break off. According to Giddens, the model relationship is pure, it is a value in itself (Giddens, 2015).

Cultural patterns that put individual actions in order have lost their unambiguous form. The uniform cultural *habitus* has broken up into several equal *habitus*. An individual faces a multitude of patterns present in the social space of meanings and is forced to choose one of them, uncertain about the consequences of his/her choice. This

goes hand in hand with the need to become aware of the existence of many possible patterns of action (Kaufmann, 2004). The multitude of existing models of life means that starting a family is no longer an obvious choice and a 'natural' stage in life. All the more so, choosing a family life is not so evident anymore. Individuals no longer can rely on the tradition and experience of their ancestors, like they used to do in the past, because traditions have lost their relevance and have become useless in modern reality of advanced and changing technology. A young mother does not draw on the experience of her mother or aunts: she prepares for a new role by attending birthing school and reading guidebooks. The knowledge and experience of older women are of little use to her, she does not trust them and is far more willing to follow patterns provided by the market. As social roles are less and less sex-determined and thus, are no longer complementary, it is also less and less clear what it means to be a good wife or a good husband.

An individual: the subject of social life and the centre of reproductive decisions

In earlier eras, the family was primarily a supra-individual whole, and its members would submit themselves to the family's own interest. It also applied to decisions to start a family and having a child. The individualisation process has radically changed it. An individual has become the subject of social life; people's self-definition is no longer based on collective belonging, a close relationship with the group known as 'we'. The growing complexity and diversity of social life results in a multitude of different forms of collective life in relation to which an individual may use the pronoun 'we'. It also applied to the decision to start a family and have a child. Loosening relationships with groups that have previously given social roots (i.e., a family, a neighbourhood, an employee group) increases the degree of independence of individuals and the scope of their choices. They can "decide about themselves to a much greater extent. But they also *must* decide more about themselves. They not only *can* but *must* be self-sufficient. For that matter, they have no choice" (Elias, 2008, p. 144). In place of obligations towards the group, including the family, people also have responsibilities towards each other. People are obliged to take responsibility for whom they are, for their biography and the course of their life. "A man living in an individualised society must learn, under the pain of permanent disadvantage, to understand himself/herself as a centre of actions, as a planning office of his/her own biography, skills, orientation, social contacts, etc. The society *must* be treated individually as a »variable«" (Beck, 2002, p. 203). This also applies to relationships with others as

they become a part of one's identity development process, a part of one's biography. Other people I am in a relationship with, people that I choose, who they are, testifies to who I am, to what extent I fulfil my duty to take control of my life. "The ideology of »loyalty and fidelity«, according to which commitments to the community derive from »innate« feelings towards family, nation or other type of social relationships based on ties, is replaced by the ideology of »authenticity and pure relations«, which primarily emphasises an individual's commitments towards him/herself or his/her own development" (Marody & Giza-Poleszczuk, 2004, p. 145).

Starting a family is no longer a natural stage of life. It might but does not have to be the next step to be taken by an individual. People face a dilemma whether to start a family or to invest in themselves, in their own development ensuring them a high status on the labour market and the related privileges. The answer is not easy. A family reduces freedom of individuals and depletes their resources. It demands time and commitment. At the same time, many tasks this far performed by family are now successfully fulfilled by other institutions. People do not need a family to provide themselves with means of support when they get old or medical care when they get sick or to satisfy their basic, daily needs. They can simply pay for certain services and are not obliged to reciprocate. Studies show that getting married and having children as conditions for a successful, happy life have now declined in importance. In 1992, more than half of adult Poles considered children and a successful marriage to be factors determining a good life (52.3% and 56.3%, respectively). In 2015, children were important to 48.7% of respondents and a successful marriage to 50.3% of them (Czapiński & Panek, 2015). A decision to start a family becomes even more difficult because contemporary reality requires from people slightly different tasks and poses completely new challenges. Making sure that a child has the best take-off position for the future entails the necessity to take more action than simply relying on education and family social capital available to everyone. Participation in the labour market requires specialistic preparation confirmed by relevant certificates. It is necessary to invest in offspring and raise high-quality children (Becker, 1990). These are not only parental tasks that undergo changes: one of the fundamental tasks, which is to protect a child and guarantee him/her safety, requires taking a different type of actions than those that were sufficient in the recent past. Parents must face various threats, such as types of availability of addictive substances or risks and dangers of virtual reality, to mention just a few. Modern parents must not only have appropriate competences to deal with these types of threats, but also need to keep updating such competences. Intimate relationships are much more demanding than they used to be in the past, the more so those that turn into civil partnership or marriage. The pure relationship model

(Giddens, 2015) is extremely demanding. The temperature of feelings should not fall and the relationship should provide continuous satisfaction and be an opportunity for development and self-fulfilment.

The family: a risky investment

Choosing a partner with whom one wants to have a child is one of the most important life tasks that contribute to the development of one's identity and biography. Reproductive decisions are no longer made by a dyad, but by an individual bearing responsibility for all his/her choices, including those related to procreation. Such questions as: Do I want to have a child? When to have a child? Whom to have a child with? become one of the most important questions that young people must answer. And the answer is not easy at all, all the more so that the key question is whether to invest in family relationships or in one's own development. A family network of broad and diverse support is an asset, the importance of which cannot be overestimated. All studies show that the family is the major source of help and support in difficult situations. However, while drawing on family resources, one must also make his/her own outlays and not only financial, but others, such as time, commitment or emotions. A decision to start a family is difficult not only because the benefits may turn out to be smaller than those accruing from investing in yourself, but also because, like other social relationships, the family may not last for ever. Marriages are increasingly dissolved by divorce, in particular since 2000, while a formal separation plays a marginal role. In 2018, the divorce rate was 327 divorces per 1,000 newly contracted marriages, while the marital separation rate was 6.5 (GUS, 2019). People put off their decision to get married and more and more couples choose cohabitation for two reasons: because of the wedding and reception costs; the wedding often follows carefully arranged engagements (Przybył, 2017), and because of the uncertainty of marriage. And the costs of divorce are significant, not just economic costs but primarily emotional, especially if a couple has a child together. Breaking off the relationship in which one's emotions have been invested, is extremely expensive in financial and emotional terms.

Considering the above, one can ask the question whether people will decide on children and marriage as a permanent relationship in the near future. Well, the answer is yes. Marriage still brings many benefits that exceeds the benefits of living alone. These are not only economic benefits (marital property acquired during the marriage is owned by both spouses equally, regardless of their own contribution) but also others. The social status of a married person is still higher than that of a single

person. Marital community entails the division of tasks and cooperation in carrying out day-to-day chores. Family members are entitled to use the social capital resulting from family connections. Unlike the industrial age, however, “marriage has ceased to be a generally available way of life” (Żurek, 2010, p. 103). Not everyone will be able to afford it and not everyone will equally benefit from marriage. It should be remembered that in the pre-industrial era, according to historical sources, quite a large percentage of people remained unmarried for one main reason: they had no assets to provide their potential family with social security (Flandrin, 1998). Starting a family requires adequate resources, not only economic, to enjoy the desired socio-economic status. Those who have the assets must face a different problem, namely finding a right partner. Despite all changes, marriages between individuals who are, in some culturally-important way, similar to each other (homogamy) prevail (Domański & Przybysz, 2007; Przybył, 2017). Beck predicted that women who have great professional competence, occupy the highest positions and thus enjoy full economic independence will be in the most difficult situation. It will be tough for them to find a partner with a similar, and even higher, social status. They also have much more to lose if they get married and have a child. Taking a break from work for childbirth may adversely affect their professional career. In Beck’s opinion, women with low qualifications, who are, therefore, constantly being pushed out of the labour market, will display a greater tendency to marry. For them, marriage means stability and a sense of security. On the other hand, if they get a divorce, the likelihood of falling into poverty will increase significantly (Beck, 2002). Recent studies on cohabitation and non-marital childbearing show that these behaviours might reflect also some economic and institutional obstacles to marriage experienced more often by women of the lower social strata, i.e. they are linked to a pattern of disadvantage (Perelli-Harris, Sigle-Rushton, Kreyenfeld, Lappegård, Keizer, Berghammer, 2010).

Despite the risk associated with engaging in a permanent relationship, people will decide to have such relationships, including marriage, in the search and expectation of closeness and intimacy. Individualisation increases the need to live in a community, and the community of souls becomes the desired goal. “It is less material security and affection than the fear of being alone which keeps families and marriages together” (Beck, 2002, p. 176). Emotionality is one of the three features, next to egotism and ontological uncertainty, of post-modern social nature, and the emotional self-fulfilment of individuals has become the basic function of the family (Marody, 2015). The value of children increases immeasurably because a child “becomes *the last measure against loneliness* that people can use in the absence of other possibilities of expressing love” (Beck, 2002, p. 181).

Conclusion

In reply to the title question, it can be said that the family is still a beneficial investment but it entails a very high risk. This investment, like any other, requires adequate outlays. The costs associated with having and maintaining a family are huge and very different in nature. Different family forms, defined by parenting and partnership patterns provided contemporarily by the market and experts, are extremely demanding. Bearing in mind strict requirements of the labour market, following these patterns is very difficult and extremely expensive. Profits are uncertain. Not everyone will be able to afford starting a family. Nevertheless, most of us will try. Still more people decide to get married than form a civil partnership, however, non-marital unions are on the rise. Even the breakup of one relationship does not discourage people from starting another. Data show growing remarriage rates. In 1980, 87.5% of marriages were the first marriages for both spouses, while in 2018 there were 79.3% of them (GUS, 2019). The family ceased to be a 'for life' institution but its attractiveness has not decreased. People will build different forms of family relationships and when such relationships break off, they will start new ones. The family is becoming a kind of fixed contract valid "until further notice, and its purpose is regulated exchange of emotions" (Beck, 2002, p. 195). It may fail, but it remains the basic community of feelings and an intimate relationship forming its core is the source of what is particularly valuable in the age of individualisation – emotional self-fulfilment.

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