

Conceptualizing 'Children' across Age Groups in Lithuania: A Preliminary Account Using Free List Tasks

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Abstract. A variety of economic, personal and social reasons may have influenced Lithuanians changing attitudes toward having children, which has been causing a significant fertility decline since the early 1990s. The conceptions one has about children may affect the decision to have or not to have children. By applying a bottom-up anthropological research design, this paper aims to examine the relationship between social contexts and cultural norms as they influence the way people of different generations conceptualize children. The results of the study reveal that the conceptions one has about children are subject to change. This change can be influenced either by real life experiences of raising one's own children, by observing others raising their children, or by other socially, culturally or psychologically motivated reasons. Hence, the shift in the perception of 'children' over the life cycle is the focus of this paper.

Keywords: demographic transition, fertility decline, attitudes toward having children, generational perspectives, social contexts and cultural norms.

Introduction

Since the early 1990s, Lithuania has been undergoing significant transformations in family life. The country has experienced a significant fertility decline. A variety of economic and social reasons may have influenced people's changing attitudes toward having children, such as socioeconomic transformations, economic difficulties faced by post-Soviet society, unemployment, low income, poverty, inadequate social and family policies, and the emigration of youth. Other determinants were inherited from the Soviet system, such as lack of dwelling, orientation towards the paternalistic state policy, the conflict between the patriarchal attitudes and emancipation, and the specifics of female employment. One also needs to consider value orientations and lifestyles, such as individualization, emancipation, an increasing freedom of choice, secularisation, and the modern methods of contraception (Stankūnienė and Jasilionienė 2008).

According to the Lithuanian Department of Statistics (2022), from 1990 to 2021, fertility was rapidly and steadily declining in Lithuania. In the year 1990, there were 56,868 new-borns, in 2000, 34,149 new-borns were registered, while, in 2010, 30,676 new-borns were recorded, and, in 2020, there were 25,144 births. Currently, the fertility level in Lithuania is one of the lowest in the European Union, and it is far below what is required for population replacement. Additionally, having children is usually postponed to later stages of life, with the mean age of women at the birth of their first child increasing. According to the Lithuanian Department of Statistics (2022), in the year 2001, the mean age of women at childbirth was 26.8 years, whereas, in 2010, this age reached 28.9 years, and, in 2020, it was already 30.4 years. The mean age of women at the birth of the first child in 2001 was 24.2 years, while, in 2010, this age increased to 26.4 years, and it further grew to 28.2 years in 2020.

Recently, there have been studies in Lithuania focusing on various aspects that may influence decisions (not) to have children. Several studies were done on the childlessness trends and experiences (i.e., Šumskaitė, Rapolienė, and Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė 2019; Šumskaitė and Rapolienė 2019; Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, Tretjakova, and Ubarevičienė 2019), on reproductive expectations (Šumskaitė 2014; Ražauskienė and Šumskaitė 2021), and on the reproductive behaviour of Lithuanians (Tretjakova 2012). Additionally, there are several studies focusing on the evaluation of family-friendly policies, and the quality of life of adults who have children (Galdauskaitė 2018; Norgėlaitė 2021).

According to Vyšniauskienė and Brazienė's (2017) study, Lithuania's family-friendly policy is mostly focused on monetary payments. As a result, such aspects as family and work reconciliation, the development of the preschool education system, and the promotion of a favourable attitude by the State and employers towards workers with children are not getting enough attention. However, as Norgėlaitė (2021) points out, an individual's decision to have children is determined not only by objective reasons and circumstances but also by the subjective assessment of one's present and future. Thus, focusing on objective reasons when explaining the dynamic of fertility trends is not enough. In the fertility discourse, more authors are starting to talk about a certain social uncertainty which appears to be characteristic of modern societies. This uncertainty is partly caused by a lack of clarity and consistency in people's life trajectories, such as the increasing number of possible life choices and the concomitant increase in anxiety about the correctness of one's choice(s). Consequently, people can face difficulties when making decisions with long-term consequences, such as the decision to have children. Norgėlaitė's (2021) study – biographical interviews with representatives

of cohorts of 1970–1984 – revealed that features common to modern societies, such as the aforementioned high levels of uncertainty, are noticeable. However, Norgėlaitė concluded that, although these trends can influence decisions regarding childbearing, they are not dominant.

Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė, Tretjakova, and Ubarevičienė's (2019) analysis of cultural norms regarding childlessness revealed an ambivalence in Lithuanian attitudes. On the one hand, the study participants expressed support for individualistic attitudes by stating that an individual has the right to decide whether to have a child or not. On the other hand, there was substantial support for the familistic norm that children give meaning to life, especially to women. A study by Rijken and Merz (2014) comparing perceptions of voluntary childlessness by men and women found that they were quite similar. The only differences found were that men expressed slightly more disapproval for the decision to choose volitional childlessness than women did. The authors noted that parenthood generally affects men's lives less than women's. The authors also noted that women's decisions likely reflect their concern over the financial, time and energy costs for themselves if they were to raise children, while men chose to express disapproval in order not to seem self-centred and callous. Hence, it appears that men's decision bias was hypocritical, while that of women was pragmatic.

A study on the experience of childlessness by Šumskaitė, Rapolienė, and Gedvilaitė-Kordušienė (2019) revealed that childlessness can be positioned on three different levels: personal, interpersonal, and cultural. The personal level revealed the importance of individualistic values for decisions not to have children – freedom from the burden, taking care of oneself, and recognising the responsibility to raise children. On the interpersonal level, women of reproductive age expressed positions that either were agreed upon with their partners not to have children or stated how difficult it was to reach the agreement due to different attitudes toward having children. The narratives of women from older generations reveal more inert life scenarios, as they rarely openly discussed their expectations related to children with their partners. Additionally, the research showed that the impact of cultural and religious norms had a strong influence on not only women from older generations, but also on women of reproductive age: having children was believed to be a natural part of marriage, thus only if a woman was not married she would choose to remain childless.

Ražauskienė and Šumskaitė's (2021) research revealed that the procreation expectations and their fulfilment are not static or early determined: they change depending on the circumstances of the family creation, self-realisation in one's

occupation, and the reconciliation of the procreation expectations of the partners. Obstacles to the realisation of one's procreation expectations may be social, financial, and medical in nature, such as conflicts among partners, divorce, lack of financial stability, issues of reproductive health, etc.

These studies, although very helpful in understanding the impact of various individual, social, and cultural aspects on the decision (not) to have children, do not sufficiently explore the cultural domain. Rather, they develop causal relations in the factors affecting the decision-making about having children, but they leave unaddressed the temporal socio-cultural changes affecting ideas about having children. Additionally, these studies – although excellent in their analysis of the concerns people have regarding decisions to have children – provide only top-down explanations. These explanations show, on the one hand, that the government and the economy-ruling institutions need to pay more attention to the uncertainties which citizens (and, by default, employees) feel about their future and the ability to raise a family and, on the other hand, the studies suggest some of the core psychological responses to these uncertainties. The current study adds to this picture by applying a bottom-up, anthropological research design to examine the relationship between the social contexts and the cultural norms as they influence the way people of different generations conceptualise children. Thus, the paper aims to explore how 'children' are conceptualised across different age groups in Lithuania.

Methodology

Theoretical approach

The free list method was used for data collection and analysis. The free list method is typically used to identify the most common and culturally important terms revealing the cultural domain. Although cultural domains may vary in content and structure, they refer to all things, at the same level of abstraction, to which the members of a culture (or a group) claim to belong together (de Munck 2009). Free lists quickly and easily amass data that 1) identify items in the cultural domain, or an emic category; 2) indicate which of those things are most important, or salient within the culture; and 3) reveal how much variation there is in the knowledge or beliefs in question (Quinlan 2005). The free list method lies on three assumptions. First, when people free list, they tend to list terms in order of familiarity. When listing kinship terms, for example, people generally list

'mother before aunt', and 'aunt before great-aunt'. Second, individuals knowing a lot about a subject tend to list more terms than those people who know less. For instance, people who can look at an unlabelled map and correctly name many countries also make long free lists of country names. And third, the terms that most respondents mention indicate locally prominent items: Pennsylvanians list 'apple' and 'birch' trees more frequently and earlier than they do 'orange' or 'palm' trees (Quinlan 2019). This approach is very useful in revealing the conceptualisation dynamics of children among different age groups.

Research participants

20–30 people from four different age groups, specifically, 18–29, 30–39, 40–59, and 60 and older, were interviewed to illustrate the nuances of conceptualizing children better (see Table 1 for detailed sample characteristics).

Table 1. Sample characteristics

Age group	Number of participants	Participants' gender
18–29	25	5 male 20 female
30–39	44	13 male 31 female
40–59	47	13 male 34 female
60+	34	8 male 26 female

The 18–29-year-old age group can be seen as representative of young adults, some of whom have children, and most of whom have considered the possibility of having children in the near future. As mentioned above, Lithuanian women become mothers on average between 28–30 years old. Thus, the second age group – 30–39 years – can be representative of the age when adults are starting a family and having children. The 40–59-year age group can be representative of the age when adults have children reaching teenage years; whereas the children of adults aged above 60 years usually are already grown-ups who live independently. The data collected from the four age groups not only revealed the associations related to children across generations, but also enabled the researchers to compare how these associations changed over time.

Sample

The study employed a convenience sample. Potential research participants were approached in places where people usually are not in a rush and may be willing to take part in the study, i.e. in parks, on the streets, and in cafés in Vilnius, Lithuania. Additionally, an online questionnaire was prepared by using *Google Forms*, and the link was shared on the researchers' social media accounts and various communities (i.e., groups of students) via *Facebook*. 20–30 research participants are usually enough to reveal the cultural domain and reach the data saturation point (D'Andrade 2005). When studying cultural domains, a small sample size is acceptable since culture is a shared phenomenon, and the probability of two individuals mentioning the same thing diminishes significantly when the response pool is extensive (e.g., 1 in 10,000 for 100 responses, as per de Munck 2009). All four age groups reached data saturation, which means that any additional surveys were unlikely to change the established patterns.

Data collection and analysis

The research data was collected in June–December 2021. The research participants were asked to name all associations coming to their mind when they think about children. This question was chosen to obtain a variety of terms reflecting the range of thoughts about children. The raw free list data from each age group were very rich; however, it would have been excessive to include them verbatim in the free list analysis. Thus, as usual in this type of research (de Munck 2009), the data presented in this paper represent a cleaned-up version of the raw, chaotic, but rich data that one first elicits from the research participants.

After collecting the data, the next step was to clean up the data by reducing extended and elaborate descriptions while at the same time not losing the richness of the responses. This step was accomplished by the team of researchers¹ who discussed what terms could be used for further analysis separately and what terms were similar enough to be combined. All long answers (such as phrases, sentences, or longer explanations) were discussed and reduced to one or two key terms, that is, we reduced every phrase to its corresponding minimal meaning unit (de Munck 2009). If three or more research team members agreed on an interpretation, the term was kept in the final document for free list analysis.

1 The research data was collected with the help of seven research assistants: Žygimantas Bučius, Ieva Kairienė, Indrė Bielevičiūtė, Dorotėja Sirvydytė, Kristupas Maksvytis, Edvinas Dovydaitis, and Emilija Krikštaponytė.

When an agreement about each term had been reached, the cleaned-up data were processed by using *Flame* which is software entirely dedicated to the analysis of free lists. Two measures were used for each age group: the average rank and *Smith's Index*. The average rank refers to the average place of a term in the lists of all informants who mentioned the term. A classic example is the terms in the domain of English colour terms – the term 'red' is more salient as it appears more often and earlier in free lists than the term 'maroon'. Smith's S (for saliency) *Index* is considered to be the more significant statistic as it combines frequency with the average rank of terms. Smith's S Index is a straightforward means to measure the salience of terms. In this paper, Smith's S is considered the more robust statistic as it combines frequency with the average rank of terms. Some terms may have slightly lower frequencies but higher average ranks, which is captured by Smith's S. Low frequencies, especially if the differences are small, are likely due to someone forgetting to mention a term or not having lived experience associated with it (i.e. a male is unlikely to mention terms related to giving birth or labour pains when talking about children). Smith's S weighs rank with the frequency thus dampening down the effect of small variations in frequency, particularly when there are many respondents (de Munck 2009; de Munck & Dapkūnaitė 2020). Only the top 5 terms in each of the age groups were analysed since they capture the main patterns as shown by the highest Smith's S Index.

Research ethics

All the participants were informed that they could refuse participation and/or leave at any time. They could also refuse to reveal anything they deemed uncomfortable. No personal data (such as names, addresses, phone numbers, etc.) were collected, except for the age, gender, type of residency (city or rural area), and relationship status (single, married, cohabiting). These data were only used in the research participant's code name, and were thus not saved in other research files. The fact of having children was also indicated (by writing 'Y' for *yes* or 'N' for *no* in the research participant's code name), but more details, such as the number of children, their age, or gender, were not indicated.

Results

All four age groups – 18–29, 30–39, 40–59, and 60 and older – shall be firstly discussed separately and then compared to demonstrate how the conceptions of

'children' change when moving from the younger (mostly, the pre-parent phase of life) to the parent (pre-teen) and teen/post-teen age group to the grandparent age group. Such a sequence reveals how Lithuanians' perceptions of children shift over the life cycle.

18–29 age group

Associations related to children in the 18–29 age group included various aspects related to positive experiences and outcomes of raising children, various disadvantages and strains coming with having children, and reflections or feelings on the decision to have children. Terms revealing positive outcomes and experiences were mostly associated with the perception that raising children is a continuous learning and personal growth experience. Consequently, such terms as games (*žaidimai*), joy (*džiaugsmas*), laughter (*juokas*), friendship (*draugystė*), discoveries (*atradimai*), achievements (*laimėjimai*) and children being the flowers of life (*gyvenimo gėlės*) were mentioned. Additionally, several terms reveal that children are valued as giving meaning to life and being a continuation of one's family: future (*ateitis*), meaning (*prasmė*), the new generation (*nauja karta*).

Among the perceived disadvantages and strains that come with having children, terms like expenses (*išlaidos*), burden (*našta*), fatigue (*nuovargis*), restricted freedom (*apribota laisvė*), self-sacrifice/devotion (*pasiuokojimas*), lack of time (*laiko stoka*), and loss of personal space (*asmeninės vietos praradimas*) were frequently mentioned. Adults in the 18–29 age group perceive having children as a rather 'noisy' experience, as revealed by the use of terms like buzz (*klegesys*), chaos (*chaosas*), and noise (*triukšmas*). Interestingly, both positive and negative words were used to describe the noise that children create – while words like *chaos* and *noise* can be interpreted as having negative connotations, the word *klegesys* 'buzz' does not involve any negative association in the Lithuanian language.

In the 18–29 age group, very few terms reveal any reflections or feelings related to the decision (not) to have children. The terms that were mentioned are mostly related to the personal choice (not) to have children while considering the social pressure as implied by the terms optional (*neprivaloma*), socially exalted (*socialiai aukštinama*), and dilemma (*dilema*). However, the study participants mentioned several emotions or feelings – both positive and negative – associated with children, such as love (*meilė*), fear (*baimė*), anger (*pyktis*), guilt (*kaltė*).

The five most frequently mentioned terms as indicated by the highest Smith's S Index (see Table 2 below) **reveal that adults in the 18–29 age group mostly**

perceive children as a challenging undertaking. Their choice of words is on a continuum between acknowledging the benefits and understanding the risks or challenges usually associated with having children.

Table 2. Associations about children in the 18–29 age group

Original Name	Translation	Average rank	Smith Index
<i>Rūpinimasis</i>	<i>Taking care of</i>	3.200	0.256
<i>Atsakomybė</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>	1.429	0.255
<i>Išlaidos</i>	<i>Expenses</i>	3.200	0.128
<i>Meilė</i>	<i>Love</i>	5.429	0.094
<i>Auklėjimas</i>	<i>Nurture</i>	6.833	0.052

30–39 age group

Similarly, to the 18–29 age group, associations related to children in the 30–39 age group included positive and negative aspects related to having children. Just like in the younger age group, positive associations revealed the positive emotions or personal growth potential which children offer as indicated by such terms as joy (*džiaugsmas*), happiness (*laimė*), self-realization (*savirealizacija*), constant learning (*nuolatinis mokymasis*), and new experiences (*nauji potyriai*).

Challenges associated with children were also similar to the younger age group, for example, expenses (*išlaidos*), burden (*našta*), fatigue (*nuovargis*), and self-sacrifice/devotion (*pasiuokojimas*). However, there were more terms related to the challenges of maintaining the work-life balance and managing the responsibilities of raising the children with the possibility to have some time for oneself. This is indicated by the terms insomnia (*nemiga*), not having time for oneself (*neturėjimas laiko sau*), a decrease of ambitions in career (*profesinių ambicijų mažinimas*), or rare moments of tranquillity (*retos ramybės akimirkos*).

Similarly to the younger age group, terms were mentioned indicating the inherent value of children not only to the personal identity, but also to the community or society: continuation of the family (*giminės pratęsimas*), usefulness to the society (*naudingumas visuomenei*), fulfilment (*pilnatvė*), meaning of life (*gyvenimo prasmė*), setting in one's roots (*įsišaknijimas*), priceless (*neįkainojama*), goal (*tikslas*), and future (*ateitis*). Additionally, such terms as child's needs (*vaiko poreikiai*), child's wellbeing (*vaiko gerovė*), giving up alcohol (*alkoholio atsisakymas*), and striving for a better world (*geresnio pasaulio siekimas*) reveal the need to prioritize the child.

Interestingly, this age group was the only one which showed associations related to the physical aspects of giving birth, such as giving birth (*gimdymas*) or labor pains (*gimdymo skausmai*). Additionally, this is also the only age group which mentioned terms indicating the social pressure to have children, such as peer pressure (*aplinkos spaudimas*), or tradition (*tradicija*). Compared to 18–29 age group, adults in the 30–39 age group mentioned more terms revealing the complexity of the decision (not) to have children, such as doubts (*abejonės*), a difficult decision (*sudėtingas sprendimas*), not necessary (*nebūtini*), by accident (*netyčia*), not worth it (*neverta*). This might be related to the perceived societal pressure to have children at a certain age and the personal reflections about the decision (not) to have children.

The five most frequently mentioned terms, as indicated by the highest Smith's S Index (see Table 3 below), **reveal that adults in the 30–39 age group are similar to the adults in the 18–29 age group in terms of perceiving children as a serious undertaking.**

Table 3. Associations about children in the 30–39 age group

Original Name	Translation	Average rank	Smith Index
<i>Atsakomybė</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>	1.571	0.274
<i>Sunkumai</i>	<i>Difficulties</i>	2.500	0.169
<i>Džiaugsmas</i>	<i>Joy</i>	3.625	0.106
<i>Pasiaukojimas</i>	<i>Sacrifice</i>	4.667	0.101
<i>Išlaidos</i>	<i>Expenses</i>	3.833	0.079

The associations of adults in the 30–39 age group seem to be related to the experience of raising children, that is, balancing the sacrifices and responsibilities with the positive outcomes of raising children.

40–59 age group

The pattern to acknowledge both the positive experiences and the challenges related to having children was also prevalent in the 40–59 age group. Similarly to the younger age groups, children were often associated with joy (*džiaugsmas*), and happiness (*laimė*). Children were also perceived as an extension of one's family (such terms as continuation of the family (*giminės pratęsimas*), fulfilment (*pilnatvė*), or meaning of life (*gyvenimo prasmė*) were mentioned), with many

terms indicating the inherent value of children, such as gift (*dovana*), or miracle (*stebuklas*). Interestingly, there were fewer terms pointing out the challenges or disadvantages of having children when compared to the younger age groups.

The five most frequently mentioned terms as indicated by the highest Smith's S Index (see Table 4 below) reveal that the associations of adults in the 40–59 age group are prominently similar to the 30–39 age group, as these terms encompass **balancing the worries and responsibilities with the love and joys of raising children.**

Table 4. Associations about children in the 40–59 age group

Original Name	Translation	Average rank	Smith Index
<i>Atsakomybė</i>	<i>Responsibility</i>	2.125	0.268
<i>Džiaugsmas</i>	<i>Joy</i>	2.545	0.178
<i>Meilė</i>	<i>Love</i>	2.500	0.161
<i>Rūpesčiai</i>	<i>Worries</i>	2.400	0.151
<i>Įsipareigojimas</i>	<i>Commitment</i>	2.600	0.081

60-and-older age group

Adults in the 60-and-older age group notably had the most positive associations related to children, such as children being joy (*džiaugsmas*), pride (*pasididžiavimas*), a gift (*dovana*) with very few terms involving negative connotations, such as loneliness (*vienatvė*) or expenses (*išlaidos*). Additionally, there were many more words revealing the inherent value of the children, such as children being the value/virtue (*vertybė*), the meaning of life or the meaning of marriage (*gyvenimo prasmė/ santuokos prasmė*), the meaning of family, or the objective of the family (*šeimos esmė/ šeimos tikslas*). Adults in this age group were also the only ones to mention the terms support (*pagalba*) or the assured old age (*užtikrinta senatvė*) when thinking of children.

The five most frequently mentioned terms as indicated by the highest Smith's S Index (see Table 5 below) reveal that the associations of adults in the 60-and-older age group are mostly related to **the positive outcomes of having children. It is plausible that this age group perceives themselves as reaping the benefits of having raised children.**

Table 5. Associations about children in the 60-and-older age group

Item	Translation	Average Rank	Saliency
<i>Džiaugsmas</i>	<i>Joy</i>	2.3	0.219
<i>Meilė</i>	<i>Love</i>	1.67	0.152
<i>Šeima</i>	<i>Family</i>	1.6	0.123
<i>Gyvenimo prasmė</i>	<i>Meaning of life</i>	2	0.12
<i>Auklėjimas</i>	<i>Nurture</i>	2	0.12

Discussion and conclusions

Most European countries are experiencing a significant fertility decline, and Lithuania is not an exception. There are many studies focusing on why people are having fewer children or are deciding not to have children at all. Most studies in this field of research mainly focus on various aspects of the decisions (not) to have children, such as voluntary and involuntary childlessness and how the decision to remain childless is perceived considering the different social-economic backgrounds (such as gender equality, religion, social policy, etc.) (Koropecykj-Cox and Pendell 2007; Rijken and Merz 2014). Consequently, people's decisions (not) to have children appear to be embedded in the social, economic, and cultural contexts with individual and psychological factors also being important.

While earlier works focused on the decisions (not) to have children, the current study aimed to examine the relationship between the social contexts and the cultural norms as they influence the way people of different age groups conceptualize children. This is (one of) the first studies to analyse the perceptions of 'children' in Lithuania. Considering the life cycle, it appears that a shift in the perception of 'children' can be identified three times.

First, there is the 18–29 age group. These are the young adults with relatively little real-life experience of what it means (not) to have children. Their free-list terms mostly reveal the expectations of what it means to have children, what challenges this decision encompasses, and what effect this decision might have on personal freedom, time, financial possibilities, and work/ family life commitments. Interestingly, although the five most frequent terms are generally positive, this age group had the highest number of negative terms related to children compared to the other age groups. Children are perceived as a serious undertaking. This may mean that adults in this age group are weighing the pros and

cons of (not) having children. Consequently, their associations were positioned on a continuum between acknowledging the benefits and understanding the risks or challenges usually associated with having children.

Second, there are two child-rearing groups (30–39 and 40–59) who have authentic experiences related to raising children. Having children is an experience with unique challenges and rewards, thus this might be the reason why the free-list terms of these two groups were different from the younger age groups. Associations of these two age groups reveal the real-life experiences and practices of balancing the worries and responsibilities of raising children in spite of the resulting love and joys associated with raising them. Although some terms have negative connotations, the majority of them are positive.

Lastly, there is the oldest age group of 60 years and older. Terms in the free list of this group are different from others as they are predominantly positive. More so, the associations were mostly related to the positive experiences and outcomes of having children and grandchildren as adults in this age group usually have grand-parenting experiences. It is plausible that this age group perceives themselves as reaping the benefits of having children. In addition to having mostly positive associations, this age group also perceived children as a continuation of one's family and oneself – having children was a way to leave one's mark on the world.

The conceptions one has about children can affect the decision to have or not to have children. The results of the study reveal that these conceptions are subject to change. The change can be influenced either by real life experiences of raising one's own children, by observing others raising their children, or by other socially, culturally or psychologically motivated reasons. Real-life Lithuanian experiences and perceptions about children will be investigated further in the upcoming stages of the project through the use of semi-structured interviews and surveys.

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