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Defining the Concept of Family through the Lens of Fertile-Aged Women in Bucharest, Romania—between Traditionalism and Inclusion

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Abstract: Family is a notion that societies are consistently trying to define and redefine nowadays, according to various interest groups. It also represents a variable functioning within conditions of population aging, especially in developing countries. An analysis of what family means must consider all the factors that influence it both structurally and in terms of size. The main objectives were to identify the perception of fertile-aged women about the notion of family and to measure its possible influence on the target group's demographic behavior. The inquiry method was part of the research methodology with 499 face-to-face, semi-structured interviews done of a sample size population (women aged 15 to 49) living in Bucharest, Romania and supplemented by an SPSS analysis of the data gathered. The main results show that regardless of their education or income level, the interviewed target group declared that starting a new family or enlarging the current one is mostly correlated with financial aspects, and also that a pregnancy early in a woman's career is viewed as an obstacle to her future development, even though when asked about the *ideal* family the financial aspect was rarely mentioned. The authors concluded that respondents' mental attitude and reproductive behavior are undergoing a transitory phase. As such in Romania there is a need for sustainable demographic measures to tackle fertility issues. Several aspects support this: birth rates in the country have been consistently decreasing; the country's economy is declining; and the interviewed target group conditioned starting a family or enlarging their current one on having sufficient financial resources.

Keywords: Bucharest; perception; family; fertile age; female population

1. Introduction

Family represents a central social nucleus and many countries focus, construct, and implement their economic policies around it. Its overall societal impact is currently intensively studied due to demographic aging being a pressing reality, as countries' socio-economic structure, labor force, and implicitly their consumption level are affected by the shrinking cohorts of young people. Consequently, studies examining the connection between family policies and fertility rates in industrialized countries, including eastern European ones "often ignored by larger comparative studies and where in many instances fertility decline has been substantial", are of high interest [1].

The concept of *family* itself has largely evolved from its definitions influenced by the industrialized and then by the post-industrialized societies in relation to the work sphere to conceptions aligned with "narrow legal, economic, or social classifications". As such there is a need for a better conceptualization of

family in the context of work, and obviously a need to include recognition of additional, non-traditional, family structures and of the cultural variability in the meaning of family [2]. Studies that underlined significant differences in family support policies according to different political and cultural patterns even at the level of the European Union suggest the need for a wider definition of family addressing various family configurations (idem). Moreover, the eastern European region counterparting the western part of the continent, but also displaying important demographic differences compared to its northern or southern regions, seems just a small piece of the global demographic puzzle, and Europe as a whole is obviously often contrasted in scientific discourse with the demographic policies meant to address rather young, large populations in Africa, Southeast Asia or South America, which represent an increasing percentage of the global world. Consequently, in a broader global context, family and fertility issues should also be connected with challenging problems such as the "burdens" and "threats" or the "scarcity of resources" caused by the overpopulation of the plannet, linked according to the neo-Malthusian rationale to an environmental and associated humanitarian and health crisis and representing explicit conditions of policy [3]. Climate refugees or pandemics are just a few of the very topical examples connected nowadays with an incresed population pressure on environmental ressources, and which are obviously pushing the social and economic systems to their limits all over the planet.

In Romania, the concept of family is strongly influenced by the social and demographic policies developed before and after the communist era, and aimed to ensure the highest possible number of followers [4–6].

Three stages of cultural and societal conditions have shaped how the population has come to view or symbolize family. The first stage ended around 1945. Up to that point, Romania was profoundly rural, and as such family was a traditional construct that represented a marriage between a man and a woman and a large number of children [7]. This time period was perturbed by two world wars but saw no significant changes to the socio-demographic context.

The second stage corresponded to the communist regime, between 1945 and 1990, when family was considered "the vital cell of the society". The regime came to power after the Second World War, and, up to 1958, the country functioned similarly to a Russian occupation that was then followed by the presidencies of Gheoghe Gheorghiu Dej and Nicolae Ceaușescu. This second stage ended together with the presidency of Ceaușescu with the violent revolution of December 1989. During this period the family construct changed according to the socio-economic transformations the country went through: that of economic growth, a higher employment rate—including among the female population; very rapid industrialization and urbanization after 1970; an improvement of the health system; and an increase of the education level. This saw families auto-correct themselves by decreasing the number of children, which is a common tendency for countries going through an intense industrialization phase. One result of this demographic behavior was that the communist authorities decided in 1948, for the first time in the country's history, to ban abortions [8]. The decision was explained by a need for a more numerous workforce as the population was acting in the precise opposite way. Article 482 was introduced in the Penal Code, establishing punishments of 3 months to 5 years of jail for women who had an abortion or people (medical personal or not) who performed the procedure [9,10]. In 1957 authorities revise this article and allowed on-demand abortions and prosecuted only those who performed or underwent this procedure outside a hospital [11]. After a period of low birth rates and a higher need for a numerous workforce, abortion was made illegal again in 1966 with the 770 Decree from 1 October 1966 [11–14]. This decision was supplemented by the 779 Decree from 8 October 1966 that imposed strict conditions for getting a divorce: they had to have a well-founded reason, the trial appearances were scheduled three months apart from one another, and a high tax had to be supported by the person initiating the divorce. The government also introduced the award of "heroine mother" to any mother that had more than ten children, as she would receive financial incentives, land properties and specific products (usually cereals). But the drastic legislation and lack of any family planning programs provoked a backlash. Officially, between 1966 and 1990, a total of 9452 women [14,15] died

as a consequence of illegal or self-provoked abortions. A pro-natalist policy was not uncommon for the communist block at that time. Still, Romania stood out for the severity with which it was applied, its complete disregard for the population' real needs and its long-lasting effects [14,16,17].

The third stage started on 26 December 1989, when the 770 Decree was abolished. Since then, abortion was legalized, family planning methods grew in number and availability, and restrictions to getting divorced were eliminated. In a country with previously closed borders, more and more Romanians immigrated to Western Europe to countries such as Italy, Spain, the UK, France, or Germany, and adopted that country's demographic behavior and definition of family. This is the time when the concept of family saw the most significant changes and the shift in paradigm took place. The generations that started their families after 1990 followed the modern family model, accepted a mononuclear structure, and society saw less of the traditional model that defined the communist regime. The nuclear family with strong traditional accents is still prevailing, but structures such as celibacy, single parents or same-sex couples had a visible manifestation after the 2000s.

The objectives of this study consist of determining the target group's opinion on the preconditions for starting a family, as well as priorities that should guide women during their adolescence and youth; how pregnancy influences women's social and economic development; and the idea of an ideal family. The limits of the study relate to the authors' difficulties to obtain statistical data or, in some cases, the total lack of data. As such, the field surveys constituted the basis for calculating marriage rates, fertility rates, and birth rates for specific age groups, as well as the number of consensual unions.

A study about family has double usefulness. On the one hand, it aims to obtain a portrait of the population perception on the topic, which has an immediate repercussion on the structure and dimension of the family. On the other hand, this type of study covers a topical issue as this country has to align its family legislation to the EU standards in terms of rights and personal freedoms of the population, namely to the issue of same-sex marriage. The most notable importance of this study derives from the fact that it tackles a possible explanation for Romania's strong depopulation trend [18,19]. This is currently explained, at a very general level, through two components: high migration rates [20–22] and low birth rates [23,24]. Low birth rates and correspondingly shrinking families can be a consequence of a change in outlook and perception related to this subject. Understanding the causes of the negative demographic phenomenon that has been accentuating during the last decades can provide adapted family policy measures and find solutions for the improvement of the country's demographic situation. Women have a decisive role in establishing a family's dimension, and they are influenced by the presence and strength of cultural models, as these often weigh in on the criteria a family should meet [25].

Studies showed that society has a significant influence on how personal commitment and as such marriage forms in the mind of an individual. Traditional values may direct couples to higher levels of dedication [26]. Gender is also important as men from divorced families are committed to their interpersonal relationships, and the opposite seems to be the case for women [27].

The authors consider this study necessary and novel especially because of the 2018 referendum, which was aimed specifically at defining what a family is, showed the polarized opinions of the Romanian population, with modern views clashing with strong traditional ones. This study intends to clarify the causality of this phenomenon by approaching it from a complex perspective that includes economic, historic, social, and demographic factors.

2. Literature Review

Family is a broad concept approached by several disciplines co-interested about the social and economic implications as well as the biological and health implications the topic has in the actual context. The continuously evolving family paradigm is a complex issue challenging the social planning policies in the post-industrialized societies whose definition is also changing accordingly. Preoccupations to define family structure and its social construction are found both in the industrialization and the

post-industrialization times, as the functional family and the gender roles were important terms to further shape labor force policies and to conceptualize family in the context of work [2].

Family is a common component of models of social capital constructed by experts [28]. Defining the *ideal family* is a qualitative and subjective endeavor, as it is not a result of scientifically corroborative data but rather a reflection of the psyche—a social and mental product of a population. Specialized literature exhaustively studied the notion of "marital satisfaction" and correlated it with the structure and functionality of the family. The authors considered this a starting point for the literature review in terms of the ideal family. Marital satisfaction is related to general happiness within couples, which usually translates into a good feeling of marriage. The authors Edalati & Redzuan [25] stated that marital satisfaction is an individual experience in marriage, which can only be evaluated by each person in response to the degree of marital pleasure.

The idea of family is usually conflated with that of marriage, which in itself changed with time, being viewed first as "a context for having children" and presently as "a companionate arrangement" [29]. Family structure has undergone considerable changes over the last century; the notion of *family* has become more and more fluid, and there is no such thing as a standard family [30].

Other preoccupations were to define family in terms of gender roles, as the traditional approach and the clear structured relationships with separate spheres for men and women [31] are obviously changing in contemporary societies.

Family structure is also a result of various cultural models and "a growing understanding has emerged that cultural aspects are profoundly intertwined in economic structures and political action, affecting people's behavior at the same time" [32].

People of fertile age, representing an important contingent of the labor force or of the migrant population, are one of the core issues when studying family structures. Their attitudes toward family formation are a key element to design appropriate sustainable social and demographic policies. Although finding international consensus is an important scientific approach, regional inputs are also valuable in the context of the existing important territorial socio-economic and cultural variations leading to different demographic behavior and consequently to different dominant family patterns.

The trajectory of birth rates that have decreased from 56.2‰ in 1990 to 38.1‰ in 2018 [33] and the population number that dropped from 21,675,775 inhabitants in 1990 to 19,530,631 inhabitants in 2018 [34] both prove that Romania is experiencing a depopulation trend. Birth rates and the number of children per family highly depend on the moment in a woman's life when the first birth occurs, which correlates directly with age at marriage. The role of age at first marriage is an important factor taken into consideration; family founding, as a factor further determining the age of childbearing, is nowadays postponed in many high-income countries until an age where fertility decreases [35]. The age is important as in the case of delayed childbearing we assist an increasing influence of the biological timeline for family formation in a context in which "both men and women value biological parenthood, bringing a sense of purpose as individuals and within their relationship" [35]. The perceived "ideal timing" for family formation is governed by complex social attitudes and values being culturally transmitted through macro-level determinant norms, practices, and behaviors, as demonstrated by studies on migrant populations in Europe [36]. In Romania, the average age of marriage rose from 23.5 years in 1996 to 30.03 years in 2018. This mirrors the evolution trend measured both for the urban and rural areas (23.6 to 31.45 years and 21.8 to 28.2 years, respectively). Bucharest registered an above-average value, with marriage presently happening around the age of 30 years, in accordance with countries such as the Netherlands (30.3 years), Finland (30.04 years), Germany (30.5 years), Austria (30.06 years), France (30.8 years) and Italy (31.1 years) [37]. This indicator remains a crucial variable as "academic research on the work–family interface in both Western and non-Western contexts continues to tacitly accept marriage as the main measure for family membership" [2].

Studies have clearly shown, at least for Western European high-income societies, current evolving tendencies for an increasing secularization being responsible for the decrease in the preference for early family formation, and envisage that "young adults will postpone strong commitments and opt

for less committal and more reversible family arrangements" [38]. In general, developed countries register falling rates of marriage, combined with marriage happening later in life. In addition, it is also possible to observe a change in family patterns (for example, women become a prominent financial supporter of the family) [39]. An increased emphasis on education is associated with delays in marriage and childbearing, as the population adjusts its family structure to meet its economic and educational goals [29,40]. A reason for late marriages is provided by Nemoto [41], who concludes that inequality, socio-cultural values, and the labor system all shape women's decisions on when to get married. Moreover, the avoidance or suspension of marriage stems from the fact that women with a high educational background look for spouses with a similar situation (idem). The decline of marriage in many western countries and especially in northern countries [31] is explained by what some have experienced as the "deinstitutionalization of marriage" [42], the "individualization" of intimacy [43], or the rise of "pure relationships" [44]. Access to contraception, extended education, delay of marriage, and increased career opportunities are stressed as factors of a "second demographic transition" [45]. Higher rates of participation in the labor force and rising levels of education also reduce fertility, increase divorce rates, and delay marriage [46]. This phenomenon was named by specialists as delayed adulthood, and it has multiple economic and demographic implications. There are multiple factors that influence the decline of fertility, including better access to (higher) education, an increased presence of women in economic life, costs of having and supporting a child [47,48], the dissemination of postmodernism values about individual freedoms, limited free time, etc. [49–51].

The counterbalance is also covered by specialized studies, like Allen, Walker, and McCann [52], who found that women working in the public sector as teachers, lawyers, or engineers believe that being married is a facilitating factor, at least in some cases, for promotion. Numerous studies analyzed cohabitation and marriage as well as the reasons for choosing one to the detriment of the other [53]. The late age of marriage is a result of long cohabitation periods, and it was observed that in many cases, unmarried cohabitation is preferred as a very popular form of partnership [31]. As such, young people intend to live with at least one partner before marrying [54] and, for example, Nock [55] concluded that younger generations prefer cohabitation because this type of relationship is not institutionalized.

Family in terms of dimension and structure still excludes, in the light of employment legislation, including that in Romania, many family structures such as same-sex couples, multi-generational and extended families (e.g., including parents or other elders; members from outside the bloodline or with grandparents providing primary care for grandchildren), and virtual families [2]. Family structure is recognized by several research studies a result of intergenerational transmission of family behavior, at least when teenage parenthood is concerned, and might be considered a result of both a social learning process and the individual repetitive reproduction of learnt relationship behavior while growing up [56].

As a main precondition for family formation, studies mention economic factors focusing on the availability of resources, like income and time investment in children [57], as well as the completion of studies that in the case of high-educated men and women delay their entry into the labor market and consequently the commitment for a first union postponing their transition to parenthood [58]. Exiting the educational system and entering the workforce as well as partnering and becoming a parent are major role sequences for the transition into adulthood and family formation [59].

However often there are context complexities to be discussed, such as in the case of extended, patchwork, and virtual families or long-distance migrant families [2], and economic variables would not stand alone as a precondition for union and parenthood being associated with other factors. Legalizing same-sex marriage in the 21st century marked a significant change in the legal and conceptual understanding of family and parenthood [60,61], a change that started in the late 1960s with step-parent families and families formed through assisted reproductive technologies.

3. Case Study

Bucharest was chosen as a sample city for this study because it represents the largest and most populous urban area of the country and one of the most economically developed. The sample city is a destination for both national and international in-migration, with flows continuously increasing [62]. Due to its political and administrative role, the capital city has the capacity to positively influence the population's quality of life. Higher incomes generate an overall better quality of life and thus produce changes in the role and status of women and their perception of family. As such, out of all Romanian cities, Bucharest is the one, at least theoretically, that resembles western European cities the most.

4. Materials and Methods

The authors built a questionnaire comprising 21 questions, both closed and open. The closed questions quantified the respondents' age, education level, number of children, their civil status, whether or not they desire more children, and priorities women should consider during their adolescence and youth. The open questions centered on personal opinions and beliefs. These included: the ideal number of children a family should include; the ideal age of marriage; the impact of having a child during adolescence or early youth; the definition of an ideal family; the 2018 referendum (that aimed to include a specific clause in the country's constitution which would designate marriage as a union between a man and a woman); and accepting non-conventional types of families or legalizing same-sex marriages. The target group included females of fertile age, namely between 15 and 49 years old, living in Bucharest.

The field research consisted of 499 questionnaires applied between 1 June and 30 September 2018. In the field, during face-to-face interactions, 551 questionnaires were filled, out of which 52 were eliminated due to a high number of non-responses which would have tainted the results or ineligibility of the respondents in terms of age or residence. The locations for the questionnaires were chosen to cover a broad spectrum of respondents in terms of age, economic, and educational backgrounds, but also residence. The sites included all of Bucharest's six sectors; public spaces such as parks and squares; general commercials areas (shopping malls, supermarkets); and administrative and educational institutions. The advantages of filling in the questionnaires face to face were: the ability to choose the target group; the possibility to clarify possible queries of the interviewee in real time; and/or identifying non-verbal reactions that validate the answer or questionnaire. Face to face interactions can also have disadvantages, such as being time consuming, and they were sometimes done in crowded and loud areas where multiple stimuli could affect the interviewer–interviewee communication. The sampling was done following the aim of the research, of targeting the segment of the population with a direct influence on the family's structure and dynamic. All subjects gave their informed consent for inclusion before they participated in the study. The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki, and the protocol was approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Geography, the University of Bucharest. The authors gathered and processed official statistical data from the National Institute of Statistics [33,34,62] on the total number of population, migration, and the average age at the first marriage so the research would be complete and also comparable with other studies [63].

The respondents are all women aged between 18–49 years (fertile aged) living in Bucharest, from different working fields, with differing educational backgrounds and marital status. The respondents' profile can be resumed as follows: most of the women were aged between 31–40 years (35.5%) and 26–30 years (20%), 63.5% had higher education, 64.3% were married and 51.7% had a medium monthly income (1000–2500 LEI) (Table 1).

Table 1. Respondents profile—socio-demographic indicators (percentages).

Age		Educational Status		Economic Status		Marital Status	
15–20 years	7.6	Secondary	1.2	<1000 lei	16.8	Married	64.3
21–25 years	18.4	High-school	35.3	1000–2500 lei	51.7	Unmarried	35.7
26–30 years	20.0	University	63.5	2500–4500 lei	28.5		
31–40 years	35.5			>4500 lei	3.0		
41–49 years	18.4						

n = 499.

The answers were coded using SPSS 20 and Pearson correlations and linear regression were used for descriptive analyses (frequencies and crosstabs).

The Pearson correlation coefficient is a numerical index that shows the power and direction of the relation between two variables and is useful for measuring the degree of association of the two variables. The correlation can represent a large portion of the information that is reflected by many observed variables, explaining the interdependence between them [64]. The present paper uses the Pearson correlation in multiple situations: to analyze the relation between income and the desire to have (more) children, as well as the current number of children and the desire to have (more children). Linear regression is used for the same type of data that correlation coefficients are used for, as it offers the possibility of evaluating or predicting the weight when there is a relation between two variables; crosstabs analysis combines two variables and emphasizes the distribution of data for each of the questions [65]. A linear regression was applied because it has many elements in common with the Pearson correlation and as such has the capacity to strengthen the existing correlation and explain the connection between analyzed variables. For this study, the linear regression was used to emphasize the correlation between the number of children the respondents have and the desire to have more.

The different types of analysis that were used during the research process depended on the objectives and the compatibility with the data and variables interpreted. When determining the preconditions for starting a family, a crosstab analysis of the ideal age of marriage and the respondents' education level was made. The same was done when determining the respondents' perception of the ideal family dimension, namely the "present number of children" and the "desire to have more children" variables. The tables included in the article are a simplified version of those provided by SPSS in order to maintain a degree of accuracy and transparency but also in order to emphasize the most important findings.

The word cloud is a visualization method for text [66], and it was used to provide an overview by highlighting the words that appeared with the highest frequency in the interviewees' answers. As Heimerl et al. [67] mention, this is done in a static way as pure text summarization. In this research it was used to present the motivation of the respondents for (not) having (more) children, as this method uses an algorithm based on basic linear, power, and logarithmic representation of font sizes, resulting in a flexible, adjustable, and user-friendly tool for text mining tasks [66].

When it comes to defining the concept of family and explaining their views on same-sex marriage, the target group used images, concepts, or shortcuts that they have created, bowered, or inherited from their interaction with their peers. As such the authors considered that the symbolic interaction theory [68] was the best way to analyze and interpret the responses to these open-ended questions. This methodology was used many times in connection to family: its internal functioning [69], its correlation to migration [70], or to analyze romantic commitment [71].

5. Results

5.1. The Role of Age at First Marriage

The present study showed that the ideal age of marriage in the vision of 54.5% of the questioned fertile-aged women was 25 to 30 years old. Out of the 499 interviewees, 18% considered as an ideal age of marriage any moment before 25 years old, and only 16.2% saw as an ideal moment for marriage any time after turning 30 years old. The data reflect the traditional values of the respondents corresponding

to the Romanian cultural patterns as most of them support the idea of getting married at a young age. The SPSS analysis presented in Table 2 demonstrates that women with both medium and high education levels favor getting married somewhere between the ages of 25 and 30. This is a slightly different perception from the western one, where most of the target population chooses to get married after turning 30 years old.

Table 2. Crosstab between the education level and the ideal age of marriage.

The Ideal Age for Marriage	Primary Level	High-School Level	University Level	Total
<25 years	33.3%	28.4%	12.0%	18.0%
25–30 years	33.3%	51.1%	56.8%	54.5%
30–35 years	0.0%	14.2%	15.8%	15.0%
>35 years	0.0%	0.0%	1.9%	1.2%
n/a	33.3%	6.3%	13.6%	11.2%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

n = 499.

5.2. Studying the Construct of Family in Terms of Dimension and Structure

Among the sample population (499) of fertile-aged women, a percentage of 35.9% did not have any children, followed closely by 31.7% that had one child. Out of the total number of 499 interviewed women, 24.8% had two children, and less than 10% had three or more children.

The reproductive model that West-European countries had during the 1960s characterizes at present Romania. This translates into a low number of children born at an advanced age, some of them by single mothers, with most of the mothers being engaged in a consensual relationships [72]. The interviewees seemed to mirror the western model and the economic conceptualization of family when considering the dimensions of the ideal family, which means the number of children they choose to have is directly correlated to their financial means. The parents' priority is to strive toward offering their descendants the best life and education. The ideal number of children was considered to be two by 59.5% of respondents, one by 12.2%, and three by 12.2%. A small percentage of 5.5% saw the ideal family as a childless one. Respondents that prefer a small-size family justified their reasoning by the lack of money (28.5%) or time (4.6%). Those that set the ideal number of children at three or more declared it would ensure family cohesion (31.7%) or preserving the family name (11%), which once again supports a conservative perspective. Regardless whether respondents preferred large or small families, their perception was shaped by the model of their own family, as 14% of them declared that their childhood family dimensions were successful.

The results of the research show that out of the ones that intended to have more children, 61.2% were already parents of one child. The intention to have more children was lower for those that already had three or more. Those that did not plan to have more children were overwhelmingly already part of a numerous family. This category includes all that had three children or more, as well as 42.9% of those that had two children, 33.6% of those that had one child and only 11.3% of those that did not have any descendants (Table 3).

Table 3. Respondents' intention to have more children versus their actual number of children.

		No. of Children They Have	Desire to Have More
No. of children they have	Pearson correlation	1	–0.394**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000
	N	499	499
Desire to have more children	Pearson correlation	–0.394**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	
	N	499	499

**. Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

A linear regression was done between the number of children that the interviewees already had and the desire to have (more) children (dependent variable) (Table 4). It emphasizes that the more children the interviewees had, the less they desired to have more (B = −0.276). The regression coefficient (beta = −0.394) is equal to the Pearson coefficient and shows a strong connection between the two variables analyzed while also strengthening the correlation calculated previously (Table 3).

Table 4. Linear regression between the number of children and the desire to have more.

Coefficients[a]					
	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	2.313	0.042		54.508	0.000
No. of children	−0.276	0.029	−0.394	−9.549	0.000

[a]. Dependent Variable: 8.0. Would you want more children apart from the ones you have?

An interesting result is that a majority of those that did not clearly voice their intention of having children (98.5%) were the ones that did not have any when answering the questionnaire. These answers point to the fact that their priorities, at least momentarily, excluded starting a family in its traditional meaning.

The recurrent reasons invoked by those who did not want more children in the future relate to the lack of money, age, or the fact that they already achieved the ideal family dimension. This supports the conclusions of Cambir et al. [73], that rejecting the idea of supporting a child is highly motivated by the financial effort it entails. Other reasons include not being ready to be parents, limited available time, many responsibilities, high level of stress, or the fact that they feel fulfilled with their present family situation. Economic conditions are the main engine behind the respondents' image of the ideal family dimension (Figure 1B). This type of behavior is known as demographic pessimism—when limited incomes push the population to choose not to have children or to limit themselves to one [74–76]. This characterizes the behavior of Romanians as well as those of developing countries in general [77]. The second invoked reason relates to age, which is surprising because even though the respondents were of fertile age, they identified 35 years as being an obstacle for fertility. This argument is more of a psychological nature rather than biological, as it is a reminiscence of a typical model inherited from previous generations.

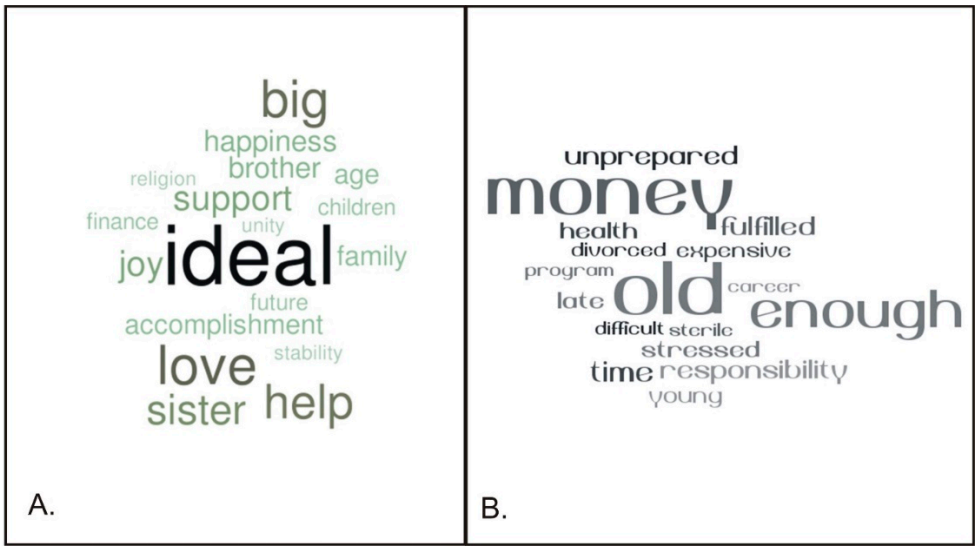


Figure 1. (**A**) Reasons for having more children; (**B**) reasons for not having more children.

Reasons for having more children included firstly the desire to have a large family. This perception is an adaptation of the respondents to a demographic behavior they have seen in their own family or the education they have received during their adolescence and youth (Figure 1A). These respondents come from large families, built during the communist regime, under the direct influence of an aggressive pro-natalist policy known as the 770/1966 Decree that imposed severe restrictions on abortions and divorces, accompanied by the lack of promotion of modern contraceptive measures [7,78]. A numerous family is also preferred because of the help children would offer to their siblings and parents and constituted the family pattern for a large number of Romanians living in rural communities and being involved in agricultural activities. The cohesive effect of a big family is proven by the idea that children are seen as a source of *mutual support*. Other reasons for having more children include the joy of parenthood and ensuring the continuity of their name.

5.3. Presenting the Preconditions to Starting a Family

Several studies have shown that people who tend to invest more time in their education and career [79] marry at a later age. Societies in which women are economically dependent turn marriage into a norm by assigning the role of motherhood and homemaking to women. Their engagement in wage labor starts before marriage, but they also withdraw from the labor force upon marriage [39]. These cultural discourses and ideologies impose the choice of either being a mother and housewife or pursuing a career. The 1950s population cohorts supply more labor force at earlier stages of their life cycle, delay motherhood without reducing the fertility rate, and show a greater tendency to stay out of the labor force after childbearing [80]. Most of our sample is part of this group and follows the same patterns.

Today's global trend of women having better access to education, investing more in their personal development and consequently obtaining well-paid jobs that require a lot of overtime and self-sacrifice is also spreading among Romanian women. This is also proven by the fact that 82.3% of respondents considered education and focusing on their career as the most important things to be achieved during the first part of one's life. Even more, 64% of respondents considered that before having a child, it is essential to have developed personally and to have a house and a stable income. There is a significant positive correlation between the importance given to a steady income and homeownership: $r = 0.388$, $p < 0{,}001$, $df = 499$; correspondingly, the respondents that desired a family gave priority to a stable income and owning a personal house.

Essential to the study was identifying the perception of the way in which a woman's development could be impacted by having a child early in life. In this case, the expectation was that the target population would mirror the attitude of developed or developing countries' mental attitude that favors education during their adolescence or youth instead of giving birth to a child. A reason that education and career have become vital for women is that one facilitates and encourages the other [39]. The importance of education was confirmed as 91.2% of the 499 respondents declared that during women's adolescence and youth they should focus on studying and developing a career, and only 6% thought they should consider starting a family during this stage of life (Table 5).

Table 5. Priorities women should have during adolescence and youth.

	15–20 Years Old	21–25 Years Old	26–30 Years Old	31–40 Years Old	41–49 Years Old	Total
Education and career development	94.7%	91.3%	88.0%	92.7%	90.2%	91.2%
Other	0.0%	1.1%	1.0%	1.1%	3.3%	1.4%
Marriage and childbearing	2.6%	5.4%	7.0%	6.2%	6.5%	6.0%
n/a	2.6%	2.2%	4.0%	0.0%	0.0%	1.4%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

n = 499.

The linear regression between the age of respondents as the independent variable and the number of children as a dependent variable reveals the fact that as the age increases, the number of children

desired also increases (B = 0.073), and the regression coefficient (beta = 0.603), which is approximately equal with the Pearson coefficient, shows a strong relation between age and number of children.

A crosstab correlation between the respondents' age group and their perspective on women' priorities showed that 1 in 3 women between 31 and 40 years old and 1 in 5 of those between 26 and 49 years old agreed on education being the focal point for young women. Data show female participation in the labor market is positively influenced by a high-level education. This increase in women's preferences to actively participate in the labor market is supported by respondents up to 40 years old. After the age of 40, education seems to be less critical in the decision to be economically active. Generally, women's participation in economic life increases with their level of education within all age groups, and having a child during their youth is seen as an obstacle for their education and personal development, with 64.5% of respondents confirming this (Table 6). An unexpected result is that only 18% of those aged between 21 and 25 considered that having a child too early in life is an obstacle.

Table 6. Structure of those that consider having a child in their youth is an obstacle to their personal development.

	15–20 Years Old	**21–25 Years Old**	**26–30 Years Old**	**31–40 Years Old**	**41–49 Years Old**	**Total**
Yes	78.9%	63.0%	65.0%	66.7%	55.4%	64.5%
No	15.8%	23.9%	22.0%	23.7%	34.8%	24.8%
I don't know	5.3%	13.0%	13.0%	9.6%	9.8%	10.6%
Total	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%

n = 499.

5.4. The Concept of the Ideal Family

Another objective of the study refers to the concept of family with a particular focus on the definition of the *ideal family*. In order to allow respondents to offer an unbiased opinion about this common yet quite abstract notion, the authors created an open question, and later used symbolic interaction theory to code and analyze their responses. From this study, two major types of definitions emerged, presented either as standalone characteristics of the ideal family or a combination of two of them (emotional features and opinions related to structure), as well as a less common third idea related to financial security (Figure 2). While all these factors are unquestionably correlated and interdependent, the study aimed to measure the extent to which one or more ideas are prevalent in the fertile female population's perception. The authors' hypothesis is that the target population will construct their behavior based on their definition of an ideal family.

The results showed a slight preference (38%) for defining the ideal family in terms of emotional features, such as love, respect, understanding, efficient communication, harmony, and mutual support. In many cases, the ideal family was not necessarily described as what it should be, but a clear statement of what it should not be: fighting and violence. This shows that while some of the respondents did not yet have a clear description of what an ideal family is, they do have a keen realization of the negative aspects that are presently part of family life. This emotional aspect of the ideal family decreases in importance with the age of the respondents. It is still significant for older cohorts (31–40 years and 41–49 years) but here it is mentioned more often as a counterbalance to the "structure" element. Moreover, while necessary for both categories, unmarried women tend to offer more importance to emotional features. The same analogy was observed in terms of income: women with medium to high incomes describe the ideal family in terms of emotional features more often than women with low to medium incomes do.

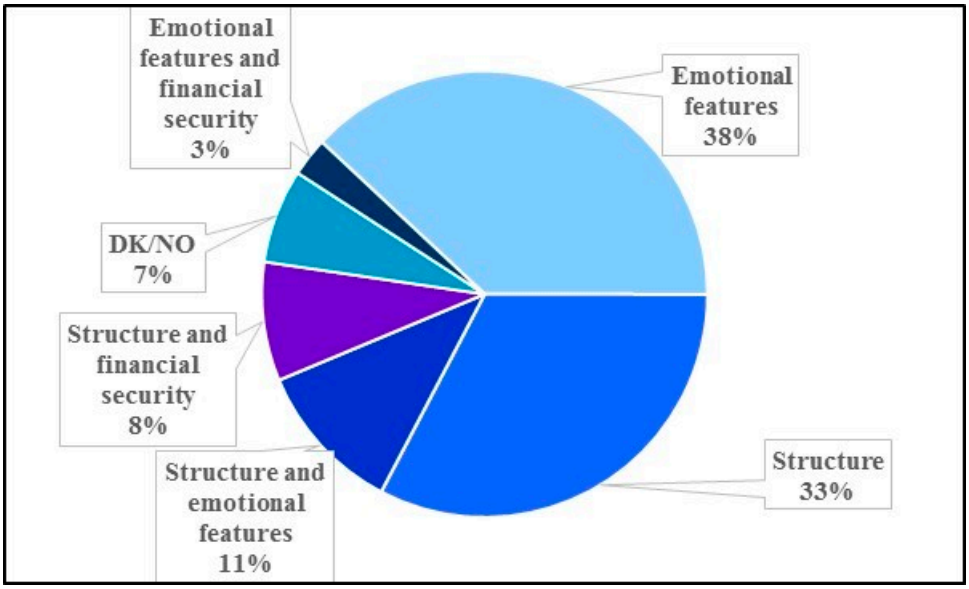


Figure 2. The elements identified as part of the "ideal family".

The second most important feature (33% of answers) was the family's structure, meaning a father, a mother, and one or more children. Over time, studies and authors positioned themselves on both parts of the structure argument and its importance. Specialized studies state either that couples with children consistently report lower levels of marital satisfaction than couples without children [81–83] or that there is no significant relationship between the number of children and either of these variables [84,85], and the results of the field research mirror this split in opinions.

Many studies showed marital satisfaction and thus the picture of an ideal family strongly related to financial security [86–89]. On a surprising note the condition of financial security is present in 11.2% of the answers but never as a standalone element. As financial security was never mentioned by itself as a necessary component, it is challenging to create the portrait of this category of respondents. It was equally present in all age groups, in both categories of "medium-level education" and "university-level education", and was in a slight minority in terms of income level for the medium to a low level. This is a sign that respondents see the ideal family as a construct that needs to encompass more elements, not necessarily only income. When mentioning income, the most common requirement is that it should be sufficient.

5.5. Perception of Same-Sex Families

At present, about two-thirds of European countries legally recognize same-sex marriages or some form of same-sex civil union. Romania is among the third that do not. In Romania, after 64 years of being considered illegal, homosexuality has been completely decriminalized in 2001 as a result of a slow process facilitated by EU pressure and awareness-raising campaigns organized by NGOs fighting for human rights [90]. However, this does not mean that the population ceased to be reluctant regarding this issue, due to the fact that homosexuality is still considered to be morally wrong given the traditional views of gender roles (idem).

Since then, there have been several attempts (in 2007, 2013, and 2015) from citizens' initiative groups to amend Article 48 of the Constitution. This Article defines a family as the fundamental entity of society and places it under the protection of the State. According to the Constitution, the family is based on freely consented marriage between spouses, a definition that appears in this form since 1991. The attempts to amend Article 48 stem from this apparent ambiguity of the term spouses and the wish to redefine family as based on freely consented marriage between a man and a woman. The furthest

this initiative got was in October 2018, when the government organized a referendum asking the population if they agree with redefining the notion of family in the Constitution.

Out of 499 interviewees, 52.3% were in favor of changing the legislation regarding the definition of the family, while 29.6% disagreed. However, out of them, 31.4% were confused regarding the actual legislation and needed further explanation in order to correlate their answer with their perception of the issue. Among the reasons for which they agreed, most of them focused on "normality" (27.1%) and the concern regarding the potential adoption of children (6.8%). Religion (5.4%) and tradition (4.8%) also had a significant role in choosing a clear side.

In a country where just 0.21% of the population declares itself atheist [91], the definition of "normality" is closely related to religion and the norms imposed by society in general. A study released in 2017 shows that in Orthodox-majority countries, views on sexual and gender norms are more traditional and conservative than in Catholic-majority or religiously mixed countries. Moreover, the population of Orthodox countries is more likely than those elsewhere to reject homosexuality [92].

The interviewees that disagreed with changing the definition in the constitution linked this issue with the direct impact on the LGBTQ+ community and motivated their choice by having the right to choose for oneself (10.4%), promoting equal legislative rights (8.8%), and being against narrowing down the definition per se (3.8%).

Almost a third of the sample did not give a reason for their choice, taking either a completely neutral position or treating it as a taboo subject that brings discomfort when discussed.

The ratio remains the same when it comes to the attitude towards same-sex marriage. Only 1 in 3 interviewees showed their support for legalizing same-sex marriage (29.3%), slightly more than the value presented in the Special Eurobarometer 437 "Discrimination in the EU in 2015" [93], where Romania found itself amongst the least tolerant countries in the European Union, with only 21% in favor of it.

Again, among the reasons invoked were the "abnormality" of this kind of relation (19%) or the supposed immorality of same-sex marriage (4.8%), 7.8% clearly focusing on their religious views as an argument against it (the "God made Adam and Eve, not Adam and Steve" argument).

On the other hand, the supporters of same-sex marriage based their arguments on the need for equal rights (9.6%), the right to choose (11.8%), and the right to happiness (2.2%).

It is very interesting to note the mention of child-rearing and adoption by both pro and con sides, as the opinions of the con interviewees seem to even contradict each other at a certain level. While 8.2% were worried about what effects same-sex parents might have on the upbringing of their children, 3.2% took issue with the fact that same-sex marriage can actually not result in biological children. However, a minimal number of the interviewees who were pro turned this into a positive aspect, as 0.2% believed that legalizing same-sex marriage would create the right context for more adoptions, which would benefit Romanian society.

6. Discussion

Many of the results obtained through the field research confirmed a demographic behavior similar to developed countries: a reduced number of children, or an emphasis put on the importance of education during a woman's youth and young adulthood. The Romanian society, however, proved to fall short of this mindset. A relevant proof is the fact that when asked to define the ideal family, a share of 33% of respondents identified it based on its structure, and mentioned the nuclear type. At the same time, this percentage illustrates more than anything else the traditional values of the Romanian society. Nowadays, more than ever before, there is a strong direction towards accepting family as something that should be more inclusive and diverse from all points of view. The fact that the target group (women of fertile age) asked for the obligatory presence of both partners (and specifically male and female) for the family to be ideal shows the tendency of the female population to view cases that do not fit this pattern as problematic or lacking normality. Families, apart from any LGBTQ+ examples, such as single mothers or fathers with children, are not easily accepted. This, in turn, will make women

that find themselves in a situation of being single mothers feel incomplete and their efforts will focus mostly on finding a partner, rather than focusing on the wellbeing of their current family.

Another important issue this article uncovers is the unsurprising strict relationship between financial security and family size. In Romania's case, however, it can hide a future imbalance between economic needs and demographic realities. Since 2018 the country's Government has delayed policies of increasing state-funded financial aid given to minors and minimized the eligibility of young people for access to preferential mortgage loans. The interviewed target group explained their intention of having one or no children by the limited financial resources or general economic instability of the country. The reality of the economic construct of Romania and the results of this study point to the worsening of the depopulation trend the country is already experiencing. Without the implementation of viable and successful measures to support young couples or recently formed families, it seems that the number of children per family will continue to decrease and/or to remain very low. Considering there is a direct relationship between the population's economic status and its demographic behavior, but also the fact that Bucharest has a specific and unique context, the authors appreciate that this case study will deliver different results than those existing in other areas of the country.

Another phenomenon to be included by future complementary studies would be the divorce rates in the country, if experienced or not by the target group, and what effect, if any, the separation would have on the family construction and on its perception in general. Another issue that is important for this thematic and should interest future researchers is finding factors that are conducive to improving the situation of families in Romania.

The authors consider continuing their research on this topic both in other urban areas as well as in rural areas so as to obtain more elaborate and comparative results on the characteristics and trends of these demographic phenomena.

7. Conclusions

The overarching conclusion of the present study is the fluctuating relationship in terms of vision and mental attitude on reproductive behavior within the Romanian target population and its counterparts in Western European countries, such as they are presented by the specialized literature. The differences between Western and Eastern Europe have been described and analyzed by numerous works, and they show that the western part of the continent scores better in terms of economic, social, and population indicators. Out of the entire region of Eastern Europe it is only the urban areas, or specifically the capital cities, that have a status comparable with the one defining the entire Western Europe, and Bucharest—our study case—is an illustrative example.

Besides the European Western model, to which eastern regions of the continent are often contrasted, one should consider nowadays a broader global context into which post-communist demographic policies including those in Romania should fit. Environmental problems and resources scarcity often debated in scientific literature as consequences of overpopulation and human pressure on natural habitats in different parts of the world are displaying at present more and more obviously severe, transboundary, intercontinental, and even global consequences.

However, Romania, as part of the European demographic pattern, reflects undoubtedly western continental values that have propagated into the Romanian society; the fact that 91.2% of respondents in this study sustained the idea that during women's adolescence and youth they should focus on their education and career is supporting evidence in this respect. Moreover, 64% of them saw having a child during this part of their life as a possible obstacle to their personal development. Another aspect where the two European mental attitudes overlap is the small family size, with more than half of this study's respondents limiting the ideal number of children to two.

A departure from the western pattern relates to the ideal age of marriage in the perception of the respondents, with 54.5% of the study's respondents supporting the ideal age of marriage to be between 25 and 30 years old. While numerous studies proved that education is a major factor in

delayed marriage, this study found that 56.7% of women with higher-level studies still saw the age of 30 as the upper threshold for entering into a first union of this type.

A clear indicator that the Romanian society is still finding its place between traditionalism and inclusion was how the respondents defined the ideal family. The more conservative perspective came forward, because 52% of answers contained (alone or in a combination of other elements) the idea that the ideal family is defined by its structure. Only 1 in 3 respondents defined it solely by its structure, and 1 in 10 thought that the structure must be backed up by an emotional component such as love or understanding. This is perfectly balanced by a more liberal vision of defining the ideal family by emotional features (alone or in a combination of other elements), with a slight majority of respondents seeing only this aspect as sufficient in achieving an ideal family. However, focusing on the emotional features did not change the conservative view of the population regarding same-sex marriage, which was supported by only 29.3% of the interviewees.

On the whole, the study shows the fact that respondents' behavior on reproduction aligns with the Western European one to a lesser degree than expected, and what they are currently experiencing is a transition in terms of reproductive mental attitude and behavior.

Future social and demographic policies in Romania should take into consideration these evolving trends in the population demographic behavior and try to envisage a series of measures which should tackle fertility and family issues in a sustainable, integrative way, reflected both in a regional and in a larger global context. Social policies nowadays could not avoid answering challenging problems caused by the increasing human pressure on the environment and its natural resources, and should envisage resilience mechanisms for the transboundary ecologic and humanitarian crisis already in place such as pandemics or climate migration.

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