



CHILDREN AND BLESSING

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Abstract:

When a child is born, God (or whatever other force we believe in) smiles at us. In Greece, we have a word that we use when referring to some good luck that is associated with certain stages of our fate. This word is “gouri” (γούρι), essentially a “blessing”, or a “godsend” if you are more religiously inclined. We, therefore, decided to conduct this research because we regard it as highly important to determine and recognise the extent to which having children is indeed considered a blessing, as well as to identify mentalities, traditions, thoughts, views, and even fatigue and pain, not only in people who have children but also those we don’t – either because they never wanted to or because it never happened. These people, our cohort of subjects, are the key that unlocked the way to many beautiful things, as well as to some other, less colourful realities.

Keywords: social research, social work, Greece, qualitative research, children and blessing

1. Introduction

When a child is born, God (or whatever other force we believe in) smiles at us. Again. The moment of our own birth was the very first time we received that smile. Perhaps we were not the first ones to receive it – our parents or sole parent or legal guardian received it too. The second time was when we ourselves became parents, whether biological or adoptive or virtual or temporary – or in whichever other way parenthood could possibly be described (Schrock 2013; Sigalow, Shain, and Bergey 2012). Society may often generate for us the pressure to undertake that role, and often manages that very efficiently (The Guardian 2017, 2020): most of us have experienced this pressure coming from friends, relatives, parents, and even students: “you are a natural-born mummy”, “you would make an amazing dad”, “if you were to adopt, you would make a little child very happy”. Such a thing is not necessarily negative nor inexplicable, albeit seemingly slightly

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repressive, especially for women, on many levels (see also Settle and Brumley 2014). Some claim that it is a matter of human nature, some others that it is a social construct (see also Settle and Brumley 2014).

We conclude that, whatever it might actually be, it does help. We mean, its ultimate aim is to help, to the extent that is humanely possible, the significant others in our lives and possibly also those around them. This is our personal viewpoint. Life is a stack of layered circles around ourselves and our desires and, in some way, we probably feel good when we offer selflessly (Nolte Dorothy Law and Harris 2009). There will always be some who are eager to doubt that selflessness. But, as a parent (of any type), you do typically love your offspring in a selfless manner. And the terrific thing is that, over time, this selflessness increases and never dwindles, not for a single day of your (serene or miserable) (Magdalen 2012). There are obviously days that appear to be less than ideal. With the first child, all possible scenarios involve uncharted territory, the fear of the unknown (Johansson, Aarts, and Darj 2010; Leavitt *et al.* 2017), the belief that you will not be able to cope and that you have run out of superpowers. With the second child and any subsequent ones, previous experience might prove helpful to some. However, the anxiety and fear regarding your children, no matter how many you may have, never leave you ("The Price of Parental Stress" 2020).

And this brings us here, to Greece. In this beautiful home country of us, we have a word that we use when referring to some good luck that is associated to certain stages of our fate. This word is "gouri" (γούρι), essentially a "blessing", or a "god-send" if you are more religiously inclined.

We, therefore, decided to conduct this research because we regard it as highly important to determine and recognise the extent to which having children is indeed considered a blessing, as well as to identify mentalities, traditions, thoughts, views, and even fatigue and pain, not only in people who have children, but also those we don't – either because they never wanted to or because it never happened. These people, our cohort of subjects, are the key that unlocked the way to many beautiful things, as well as to some other, less colourful realities. It is, in all honesty, one of the most interesting surveys we have ever conducted. We concur that all findings that emerged explicitly, as we as those that are hiding behind the words and between the lines are revealing the texture of life of many of us in this country and beyond.

2. Material and Methods

Our sample population consists of a total of ninety (90) participants of various education levels, of which fifty-eight (58) are women, twenty-nine (29) are men, and three (3) of unknown gender. Their ages range between twenty-three (23) to ninety (90) years, with the average being approximately forty (40) years.

Our subjects were asked to answer (in person, mostly) the question: "are children a blessing?". We could say that our research adopts a qualitative method (see also Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Isari and Pourkos 2015) and, more specifically, content analysis (see also Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Prasad 2008; Hsieh and Shannon 2005; Downe-Wamboldt

1992). According to Downe-Wamboldt (1992: 314-315), content analysis is applied “*without being subject to a global set of rules and processes*”. After reviewing the global and domestic bibliography, we decided to apply content analysis using the commonly accepted framework – preparation, encoding, classification – presented therein.

After collecting the subjects’ responses and familiarizing them with our data, we attempted to analyse those separately and explore any implicit notions within them. We did that with the aim of selecting the appropriate “units of analysis” (see also Elo and Kyngäs 2008; Downe-Wamboldt 1992). A unit of analysis may comprise “... words, sentences, phrases, paragraphs, or blocks of texts such as interviews” (Downe-Wamboldt, 1992: 315). An important criterion for selecting the appropriate units of analysis was our research questions, namely:

- 1) Do people believe that children are a blessing?; and
- 2) Is there a common underlying factor that connects people with similar beliefs?

The next stage was the encoding of our subjects’ responses, which was carried out by looking for keywords and associating them with code values (see also Glesne 2018; Saldana 2009). This was followed by classification. According to Morse (2008: 727) “a category is a collection of similar data, classified in the same space, which gives researchers the possibility to identify and describe the characteristics of the category...”. Also, classification enables researchers to compare categories but also define sub-categories (Morse 2008).

Finally, we attempted to identify common points as well as differences within the responses in their entirety, and associate those with the categories we created, with the aim of detecting patterns (see also Hsieh and Shannon 2005) and extracting possible conclusions. In the section that follows, we present and describe these codes and categories in detail.

Our sampling strategy was based on a cascade approach: our initial sample drove us towards selecting new subjects, which in turn helped us identify further subjects again, etc. (Isari and Pourkos 2015; Papageorgiou 2015). There have also been cases where the subjects themselves delivered responses collected from their immediate environment.

Upon commencing the study (01/10/2020), the methodological tool for data collection was not yet firmly determined. However, in the course of the study, two methodological tools were selected, namely (a) in-depth interviews (see also Paraskevopoulou-Kollia 2008; Paraskevopoulou-Kollia et al. 2023) and (b) structured interviews (Alsaawi 2014; Paraskevopoulou-Kollia 2008; Paraskevopoulou-Kollia et al. 2023). The manner in which some of the early subjects attempted to deliver their responses was the driving factor for choosing these two tools: Some subjects provided very in-depth answers, whereas others replied as they would to a structured interview. This resulted in a plethora of data to process for some subjects, whereas some others limited their responses to the most terse and absolutely essential wordings. For these reasons, we subsequently decided to adopt three different approaches for data processing and analysis, in order to achieve the richest set of information from the responses.

We initially followed a generalised approach. We identified five (5) top-level classification categories, in order to assess whether the responses from our cohort display

any bias (whether positive, negative, or none) concerning the questions asked. In the second stage, we added to our data the gender information and attempted, very cautiously, to see if there is any correlation between response and gender. In the third and final approach, we focused on attempting to identify any correlations between the subjects' views and their age. In all three cases, we plotted the corresponding visualisation diagrams.

The conclusions drawn proved to be hard to generalize, especially since the number of subjects that agreed to respond was very limited and the question they were called to answer was very specific (Baker and Edwards 2012; Ercikan and Roth 2014).

3. Main Study

3.1 First Approach

In this first phase, we ended up dividing the subjects' answers into five (5) categories. Seeking all the answers many times we noticed the frequent appearance of some word phrases. We decided to adopt these repetitive keyword phrases (either as such as they were or as a variation) as keywords. These words, in combination with the overall meaning of the answer, led us to the rendering of appropriate codes, which we used as criteria for separating/grouping the answers of our sample and consequently for the creation of our categories. We would like to note that there were cases where the 'keyword' was at the same time a code, for example in monosyllabic answers.

Dividing answers into categories occurred by searching into subjects' quotes words such as "Yes", "No", "I don't know", "Yes and No", "Joy", "Happiness" etc. while the answers which were irrelevant from these words constitute another separate category.

We present an example in order to better illustrate what we mentioned above and what follows. Subject Y1's answer to our question was: "Both children and grandchildren are happy. It fills the house with happiness". We noticed in the answer the 'keyword' happiness and we also noticed that the sentence's meaning is positive in relation to our question. For these reasons, the sentence was marked with the code "Yes it is" and was included in the category "Yes".

Following this way of separation, the categories that emerged, along with the number of responses for each, were as follows:

Table 1: Categories that emerged

Code name	Categories	
	Includes	Responses
Yes	The positive answers to our research question	48
No	The negative answers to our research question	34
I don't know	The answers which did not express any opinion on the subject	5
Neutral answer	Those answers that retained a neutral attitude towards our research question	1
No Category (see Figure 1)	Those answers which could not be included in any of the above categories	2
Total:		90

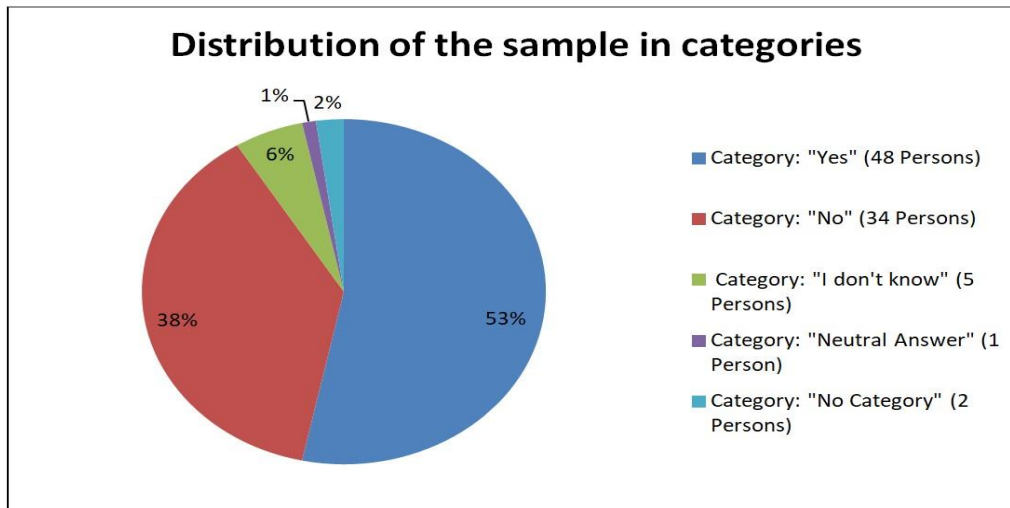


Figure 1: Distribution of the sample in categories

Regarding this first phase, we conclude that most of our subjects believe that children are a ‘blessing’.

3.2 Second Approach

In the second phase, we added -to the data to be analyzed- the factor of the respondents’ gender, aiming to observe the correlation of gender with the participants’ answers. As mentioned above, three (3) of our subjects provided no gender information, therefore the responses of these subjects were not included in this analysis. The system of reasoning and the “keywords” used to codify and categorize the responses in our sample remain the same as in the first phase (in which the first categories and the first “keywords” were created).

The only difference from the first phase is that women’s and men’s were counted separately, resulting in the creation of new categories, as per the table below:

Table 2: New categories that emerged

Code name	Categories		
	Women	Men	No gender info (response not included)
Yes	36	10	
No	16	17	
I don't know	3	2	
Neutral Answer	1	0	
No category (see Figure 2)	2	0	
-	-	-	3
Total (90)	58	29	3

The way we divided our sample can be seen in the following bar diagram (see Figure 2.)

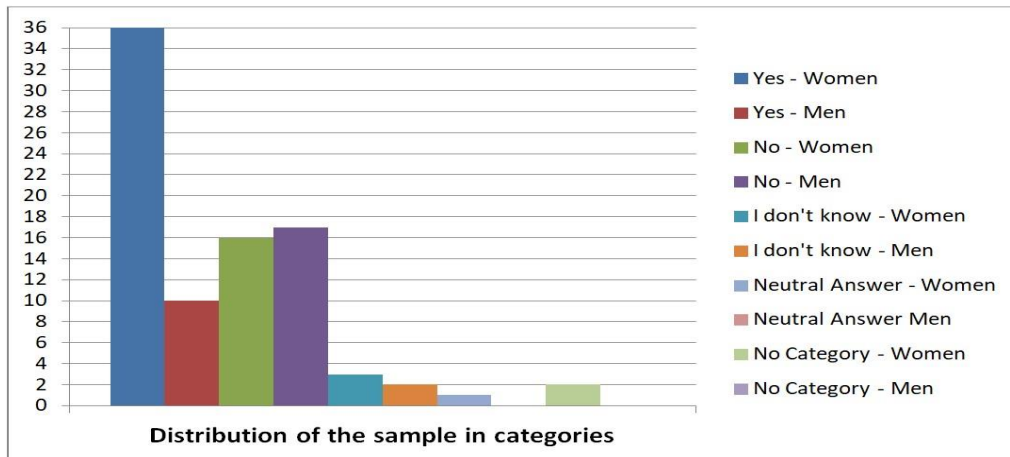


Figure 2: Distribution of the sample in categories

The result of this approach revealed that most of our subjects, who consider children to be ‘blessing’, consists of women, while most of our subjects, who do not consider children to be ‘blessing’, consist of men. We consider it right to point out that the number of men who do not consider children to be ‘blessing’ is very close to that of a number of women (17 women, 16 men). A future survey of larger and numerically equal population groups (men and women) would help confirm or discard this result.

3.3 Third Approach

In third phase, we divided our sample into four (4) categories. The purpose behind this separation was as follows: initially, we divided our sample into two (2) age groups, from which the first one included participants under forty (40) years old and the second one participants older than thirty-nine (39) years old. The age of forty (40) years was chosen as a point of separation, firstly because the average age of our sample was forty (40) years, and secondly in order for the optimal distribution of the sample in two (2) age groups to occur.

We further approximately worked as in the previous two (2) phases, i.e. searching in each age group the keywords “Yes”, “No”, “Joy”, “Happiness”, etc., then coding the answers with the codes “Yes it is” and “No it is not” and then categorizing them.

Following this procedure, the following four (4) categories emerged:

Table 3: The four categories that emerged

Codes	Ages	
	Under 40	40 and over
Yes	21	21
No	27	12

We did not include nine (9) responses in the present analysis either because the subjects did not indicate their age or because their response was unclear.

The distribution of our sample across these categories is shown in the diagram in Figure 3 below.

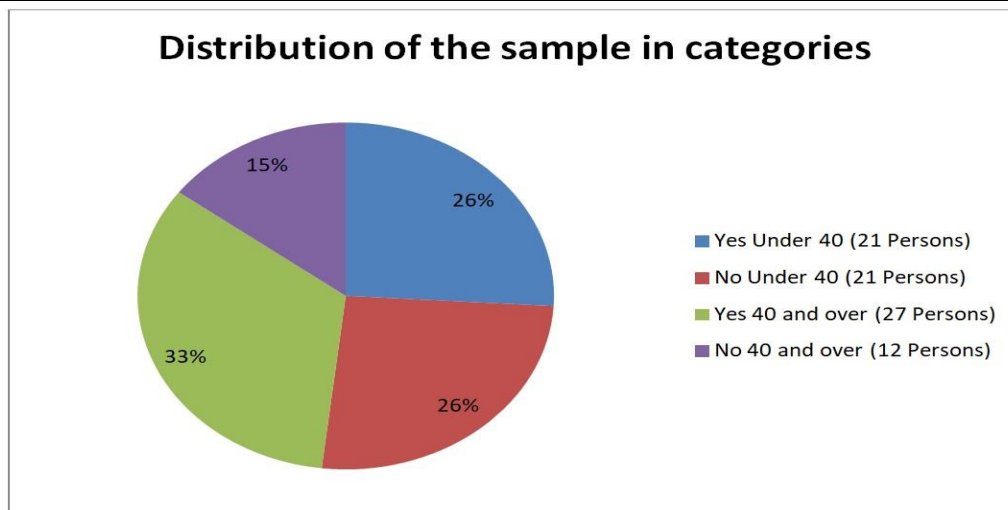


Figure 3: Distribution of the sample in categories

The aim of third phase was to find a correlation (if any) between the age groups of our research participants and their points of view on our research question. According to what emerged from data analysis, we could say that regarding the ages under forty (40) years old, age does not affect individuals' opinion, while regarding the ages of forty (40) years old, age seems to affect participants' opinion, as they tend to believe that children in a family bring good luck (are 'a blessing').

4. Results and Discussion

We adopt three different approaches for data processing and analysis, in order to achieve the richest set of information from the responses, as seen above. We could say that the subjects which comprised our sample do believe, to a great extent, that children are 'a blessing'. It would be interesting to know everyone's view on the subject, however we feel that our study will shed some light on some of its objective aspects.

Women's predestined mission to create and maintain a family by means of procreating and undertaking household responsibility appears to be a considerable impediment, not only to the attempts to reform the institutional framework but to the ambitions of women themselves.

We would like to emphasise that in the course of our research, we encountered problems associated with any survey. In many cases, social, cultural, and financial diversity is hard to organise and categorise concretely. In that sense, our observations can be us as a basis for more extensive and methodical research efforts.

The picture that emerges from data analysis is to a large extent a coincidence of important characteristics of Greek society (or the economically developed world): the social expectations related to the role of women and the position of men within this context (Samulowitz, Gremyr, Eriksson, and Hensing 2018; Cheung and Halpern 2010). Women's sanctified mission in creating and maintaining the family through childbearing and household responsibility seems to be a major obstacle not only regarding efforts to

reform the institutional framework but also women's own aspirations (Hjálmsdóttir and Bjarnadóttir 2021; Rottenberg 2017; Christopher 2012).

We would like to underline that in our research we encountered the problems associated with any research. In many cases, social, cultural, and economic diversity is difficult to organize and integrate into specific categories and groups (Grzymala-Kazłowska and Phillimore 2018; Crul 2016). In this sense, our observations can be used as a basis for more extensive and methodical research projects.

For example, regarding the stereotypes of associating the maternal role with specific professions (educators, social workers, etc.) (Williams 2023; Eagly and Koenig 2021), it is essential for them to be addressed to legitimise a woman's career choice regardless of any consequences affecting the traditionally dominant family structure as well as the more modern family schemes. Therefore, social protection of motherhood should perhaps be developed (Reich 2020; Cameron 2019) (guaranteed employment, healthcare, time off allowance, financial aid, daycare facilities, preschool care, etc.) so that women are not compelled to stifle their ambitions. Only then will we be able to re-examine whether, and to what extent, women would respond that children are a 'blessing' and also re-evaluate the responses of the men in our sample.

People who work in the social area and on social issues and, especially, on families and how their composing elements are being changed apart from working each in their own sector, they also perform social work. Sociologists, educators, social workers etc. are interested in improving other people's quality of life (Ochando Ramírez & Morcillo Martínez, 2023). As we read in Rogowski (2012: 935) 'New Labour embraced the new welfare culture, envisaging a modernised welfare state and its social workers as having to work with the grain of market imperatives (Page, 2009)'. Under these circumstances (which are radically changeable), issues such as having babies and people's feelings about it are quite unclear.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, we can say that the subjects who comprised our sample do believe, to a great extent, that children are "a blessing" (the question we asked them was whether they actually believe so).

Subjects' responses appear to be dependent on their gender but also on their age. The women in our cohort tend to support this view more than the men do, and also this view seems to be more strongly supported by individuals over the age of thirty-nine (39).

It is important to be able to identify concepts that surround our lives. These concepts define the day-to-day reality that we have structured, or others have structured for us, within which we are expected to live. When asked a question (even just a single one), a spontaneous response will typically be an honest expression of our beliefs or momentary thoughts. This honesty and spontaneity are, of course, subject to scrutiny. Some theories assert that our expressed thoughts are composed of predetermined stereotypical views within our specific social context and spacetime (Carman, 2011). Therefore, the concepts that surround our lives exist within the concept of our existence.

This is also true, to a great extent, with regard to our views on children, family, and similar matters.

It is impossible for people to not be influenced by views that have been established over the years and to question traditional views of preceding generations which, under the prism of pragmatism, have driven humanity all the way to the present time (see also Herreros Sánchez, 2023; Furstenberg, 2014). Procreation has increased the human population and, through this process, gave rise to important persons (we are all important, however, some are more fortunate with regards to their opportunities for making their importance shine) (see also Gallagher, Smith, Hardy, & Wilkinson, 2012). However, procreation has gone through multiple stages of social and traditional influence (see also Pascual Lavilla, 2023; Amorim, 2019). It is a choice, borne out of cognitive decision rather than pressure (of any kind), and it is finally easy to acknowledge that contributions to humanity's progress have also been made by persons who left no descendants, yet equally deserve to be remembered. One of our concerns has been to determine whether traditional views still prevail, whether people who have children consider them a blessing or a burden, or whether the global change in views has affected Greeks at all (see also Petkou, Andrea, Anthrakopoulou, 2021; Diakakis, Skordoulis, & Savvidou, 2021; Oomens, Geurts, & Scheepers, 2007). Our sample did not appear to be affected by such changes, but even the few dissenting views indicate, if nothing else, free-thinking persons who judge, even themselves, rationally.

It would be interesting to know every person's view on the subject, however, we feel that this small-scale study will shed some light on some of its objective aspects.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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