



Self-Fulfillment and Fertility Intentions: The Interplay of Postmaterialism and Expected Welfare State Support

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Abstract

We examined whether the perceived self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing is associated with the link between expected welfare-state childcare support and fertility intentions, and whether this association varies by individuals' level of postmaterialism. Drawing on the Rapporto Giovani 2022 survey across Italy, France, Germany, and Spain, we analyzed a sample of 2616 childless adults aged 25–34. We first modeled how self-fulfillment valuation of parenthood varies by postmaterialism and welfare expectations. Next, we estimated a moderated mediation model through generalized structural equation modeling with nonparametric bootstrap to assess conditional direct and indirect associations linking values, perceived support, and fertility intentions. The results showed that, among individuals with higher levels of postmaterialism, limited expected welfare-state childcare support was associated with a weaker perceived relevance of childbearing for self-fulfillment and, indirectly, with lower fertility intentions, whereas this indirect association was not evident among those expecting greater support. These findings underscore the importance of integrating motivational and institutional perspectives: the relevance of family policies for fertility intentions may depend not only on structural constraints, but also on whether perceived support resonates with individuals' value systems.

Keywords Childbearing motivations · Family policy · Childcare provision · Childlessness · Young adults

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Introduction

Over the past decade, many Western countries have experienced sustained fertility decline—even in nations with comprehensive family policies and limited economic disruption. This decline reflects not only smaller family sizes but also, in some contexts, rising childlessness (Neyer et al., 2022). In affluent societies, a diminishing perceived value of parenthood appears to contribute to this trend (Guzzo & Hayford, 2023), alongside a growing share of younger cohorts reporting no desire to have children (Golovina et al., 2024; Luppi et al., 2025a).

Several explanatory frameworks have been proposed. From an economic perspective, studies emphasize the role of uncertainty, showing that perceived instability in employment and income discourages fertility (Lappegård et al., 2022; Vignoli et al., 2020), whereas higher income levels are positively associated with transitions to first birth (Van Wijk, 2024; Van Wijk & Billari, 2024). From an institutional perspective, some scholars argue that family policies may be losing effectiveness, particularly when they fall short of meeting young adults' expectations regarding the costs and gendered burdens of parenthood (Beaujouan, 2023; Vanhuyse et al., 2023). Research also indicates that the effectiveness of family policies depends on individuals' cultural orientations, with identical policy measures yielding different effects depending on whether they align with underlying value frameworks (Gauthier, 2007; McDonald, 2000). However, although the connection between cultural contexts and policy effectiveness has been well documented at the macro level, the individual-level mechanisms underlying this association remain underexplored, even though recent studies point to the importance of moving in this direction (Bazzani et al., 2026).

Our paper aims to partially fill this knowledge gap. Specifically, we move beyond a purely theoretical and qualitative discussion on the connection between policy, values, and childbearing motivations, by empirically investigating how individual level of postmaterialism is associated with perceived welfare state support for childcare to shape individuals' intrinsic motivation for childbearing, captured here through the perceived self-fulfilling relevance of having children. We further assess how this motivational dimension is related to fertility intentions.

The theoretical framework for our paper builds on Botev's (2015) work and on an integration of the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) on motivation as described by Luppi et al. (2026). Botev (2015) argues that childbearing is largely intrinsically motivated (i.e., people have children because it is perceived as part of their self-realization) and that policy interventions may either reinforce or undermine this intrinsic motivation depending on how they are perceived. Under this perspective, in contemporary advanced economies, policies that enhance autonomy and competence (such as childcare services and parental leave) may "crowd in" intrinsic motivation, whereas those perceived as controlling may "crowd it out." Turning to the underlying mechanisms, the implications of policy support for fertility intentions may depend on whether such support enhances the perception of parenthood as a source of individual self-fulfillment. According to existing socio-psychological frameworks, the relevance of this pattern—that institutional support sustains parenthood as self-fulfilling life project—is likely to depend

on whether such support is perceived as consistent with individuals' needs and value systems (Luppi et al., 2026).

In contemporary high-income societies, parenthood competes with other life goals in environments shaped by values—such as postmaterialism—that prioritize individual's needs for self-expression, autonomy, and lifestyle pluralism over material security and traditional conformity (Bazzani et al., 2026; Lesthaeghe, 2010). What Inglehart's postmaterialism index actually captures has been widely debated (see, for example, van de Kaa, 2001). Even though some scholars question its ability to reflect the specific cultural drivers of fertility change associated with the Second Demographic Transition, there is broader agreement that the index effectively traces a wider ideational shift toward cultural liberalization, universalism, and progressivism in political and civic life (Lesthaeghe & Moors, 1995; Strenze, 2021; Tsai & Peng, 2025; Welzel & Inglehart, 2005). This makes the measure particularly suitable for our purposes. By focusing on the political dimension of postmaterialist values (Strenze, 2021), we capture potential (mis)alignments between individuals' cultural orientations and their perceived level of welfare state support misalignments that may, in turn, shape the relevance of parenthood within broader life plans.

Several studies show that different levels of postmaterialism are associated with distinct policy preferences (e.g., Goerres & Tepe, 2012; Hoefer, 1988; Lafferty & Knutsen, 1985). Translating this insight to the domain of family policy, and following Botev's (2015) argument on the motivational consequences of institutional support, we posit that perceived access to public childcare—among other family policies—may render parenthood more compatible with postmaterialist life goals. In particular, affordable and high-quality childcare can enable individuals to adopt more egalitarian and non-traditional family roles while maintaining autonomy—including vis-à-vis the family of origin—and preserving opportunities for personal and professional development.

We therefore examine whether, when supportive welfare contexts in terms of childcare are perceived, individuals scoring higher on postmaterialism are more likely to view childbearing as a viable avenue for self-realization, especially when parenting is embedded in a broader system of shared societal responsibility. By contrast, individuals scoring lower on the same scale—who tend to prioritize financial security—may perceive childcare support primarily as mitigating the economic risks associated with parenthood, without necessarily enhancing its self-fulfilling dimension.

Second, we investigate whether the often-observed positive association between welfare support and fertility intentions is partly accounted for by the self-fulfillment value individuals attach to childbearing. We propose that expected childcare support may be associated with positive fertility intentions among more postmaterialist people not only because it is linked to lower perceived structural/economic barriers to parenthood, but also by making childbearing appear more compatible with a model of parenthood centered on autonomy, gender equality, and personal development in different life spheres, dimensions that are especially relevant for postmaterialist orientations. More generally, we expect associations between perceived institutional support and fertility intentions to be stronger when individuals' cultural values appear aligned with the support they expect, making parenthood more consistent with aspirations for self-realization.

In this sense, focusing on childcare support is particularly relevant to the value-institution mechanism examined in this paper. First, childcare provision is more directly connected to the longer-term organization of care and work-family reconciliation than other policies such as childbearing related leaves, speaking more to whether parenthood can be integrated into everyday life without necessarily undermining autonomy and personal development. Second, childcare provision is one of the family-policy domains for which comparative research has provided substantial evidence of relevance for fertility intentions and fertility outcomes (Baizan, 2009; Del Boca, 2002; Luci-Greulich & Thévenon, 2013).

To address these questions, we draw on data from the *Rapporto Giovani* (Youth Report) survey, conducted in June 2022 on a representative sample of individuals aged 18–34 in Italy, France, Germany, and Spain. This survey provides unique data that allow us to examine whether the perceived value of childbearing relates to both postmaterialist orientations and expectations of welfare state support for childcare, while also exploring if these factors are jointly associated with medium-term fertility intentions. For the purposes of this study, we focus on childless young adults aged 25–34. This enables us to concentrate on a more homogeneous group—both in their stage of life and in how they might interpret the relevance of childbearing for self-fulfillment—as they have not yet experienced parenthood but are within the typical age range for making family planning decisions.

Background

Theoretical Models Linking Welfare State, Childbearing Relevance for Self-Fulfillment, Values and Fertility Intentions

The relevance of childbearing for self-fulfillment is a key dimension in understanding individual motives for parenthood (Brini et al., 2026). Following the main socio-psychological framework on motivation (Miller & Pasta, 1988; Ryan & Deci, 2000), by self-fulfillment we refer here to the extent to which parenthood is perceived as contributing to a meaningful and fulfilled life for the individual, either the final childbearing decision comes from a personal or a couple's shared goal. This concept belongs to the motivational sphere, as it captures one meaning attached to childbearing, while remaining distinct from other cognitive constructs such as fertility intentions, desires, or expectations. For a more detailed discussion of this distinction, see Luppi et al. (2025b).

Within the framework of the Generations and Gender Survey, for example, the Miller scale on childbearing motivations includes a specific item that directly addresses this concept, asking respondents to what extent having children is important for their personal fulfillment (Miller, 1995; Mynarska & Raybould, 2020). This reflects a broader psychological view according to which parenthood represents not merely a social role or biological imperative, but a central component of self-actualization and identity development (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Maslow, 1943). Under this premise, the perceived relevance of childbearing for self-fulfillment con-

stitutes a motivational force guiding fertility intentions and behaviors, while being rooted in both individual value systems and broader normative structures.

At the core of this motive to become a parent lie individual values—fundamental belief systems that orient people toward particular life goals and shape how they assign meaning to different life domains. Several socio-psychological models locate this form of motivation along a continuum linking cultural value systems to fertility intentions and behaviors.

According to the Traits-Desires-Intentions model proposed by Miller and Pasta (1988), values generate internal needs and priorities that feed motivation, conceived as the driving force behind intentional behavior. Motivation bridges the gap between abstract value systems and concrete intentions by generating psychological energy directed toward goal attainment. When childbearing aligns with personally or culturally salient values—such as fulfilling family duties, achieving emotional richness, or contributing to the next generation—it may crystallize into a powerful intention, internalized and pursued even in the face of external constraints (Miller et al., 2010). However, within this framework motivational dispositions—such as the self-fulfillment value attached to childbearing—are conceptualized primarily as relatively stable traits rooted in enduring value orientations. Consequently, the model pays limited attention to how contextual or institutional conditions may shape the salience, expression, or internalization of these motivations.

To overcome this limitation, Luppi et al. (2026) propose an integrated framework combining the Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) and Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This framework is useful for the present study because it helps clarify how perceived constraints, values, institutional support, and the subjective meaning of parenthood may jointly enter the formation of fertility intentions.

According to TPB, fertility intentions are shaped by three proximal predictors: attitudes toward childbearing, subjective norms, and perceived behavioral control (Ajzen, 1991; Ajzen & Klobas, 2013). In the fertility domain, perceived behavioral control refers to whether individuals feel that having a child is feasible, given the resources and constraints they face, including institutional support. TPB therefore helps explain how people evaluate the practical possibility of having a child taking into account also family policy measures. However, it says less about the type of motivation through which these evaluations become part of an intentional commitment.

This is where SDT adds an important theoretical layer. SDT distinguishes between motivations that are experienced as self-endorsed and personally meaningful—i.e., intrinsic/internal—and motivations that are driven mainly by external pressure, social expectations, or instrumental considerations—extrinsic/external (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). From this perspective, parenthood is more likely to be experienced as self-determined when the decision to have children is perceived as compatible with basic psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness. In general, when intentions are grounded in self-determined motivations, they tend to be more coherent, stable, and likely to translate into behavior (Koestner et al., 2008; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

Integrating TPB and SDT helps clarify how family policies may be connected to fertility intentions through both practical and motivational dimensions. From a TPB perspective, institutional support contributes to perceived behavioral control:

it shapes whether individuals see parenthood as feasible in light of the resources, constraints, and opportunities available to them. Family policies may therefore matter because they reduce practical barriers related to time, care responsibilities, employment, economic security, and the reconciliation of family and non-family life domains.

At the same time, family policies are not value-neutral conditions, nor are they universal in their effectiveness. By shaping the practical organization of care, employment, gender roles, and family life, policies may make some models of parenthood more viable than others. Their relevance for fertility intentions therefore depends not only on the resources they provide, but also on the extent to which they make parenthood compatible with the values and life goals that individuals consider important. From an SDT perspective, intrinsic or self-determined motivation is strengthened when a behavior is experienced as self-endorsed, meaningful, and consistent with one's values. Applied to childbearing, this means that parenthood is more likely to be intrinsically or autonomously motivated when it is perceived as part of a self-realizing life project aligned with one's values, rather than as a response to external pressure or obligation.

This argument provides the theoretical link between welfare-state support, values, and the perceived self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing. Family policies are not assumed to generate motivation for parenthood directly. Rather, they may shape the conditions under which parenthood is experienced as more or less feasible, manageable, autonomous, and value congruent. Following Botev's (2015) application of Self-Determination Theory to fertility policy, family policies may be more effective when they support intrinsic or self-determined motivation for parenthood, that is, when they make childbearing more compatible with individuals' values, psychological needs, and broader life goals. In this sense, the indirect association tested in our model reflects a value-alignment mechanism, whereby institutional support is linked to fertility intentions partly through the perceived compatibility between parenthood and self-fulfillment.

Other Theories Pointing Out Self-Fulfillment Reasons for Having Children

Other theoretical approaches seek to explain why, beyond material or normative constraints, individuals may be motivated to have children as part of their pursuit of self-fulfillment, personal growth, and life purpose. Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs provides a useful psychological lens: once basic needs are satisfied, individuals increasingly pursue self-actualization. In affluent and stable contexts, childbearing may thus reflect aspirations for meaning, identity, and emotional fulfillment rather than economic necessity. This interpretation aligns with the Second Demographic Transition perspective, which emphasizes a shift from survival values toward self-expression and autonomy (Lesthaeghe, 2010; van de Kaa, 2001).

Similarly, the Value of Children framework (Hoffman, 1975; Hoffman & Hoffman, 1973) highlights the psychological and emotional rewards of parenthood. In postmaterialist societies, children are valued less for economic utility and more for their contribution to parents' well-being, identity, and sense of purpose: in low-fertility, post-industrial contexts, emotional and symbolic benefits—such as joy, affection,

and meaning—play a stronger role in shaping fertility intentions than economic or normative factors (Nauck, 2014).

From a life course perspective, childbearing represents not only a demographic event but also a socially recognized transition that affirms identity and adulthood (Elder, 1994; Hitlin & Elder, 2007). Parenthood provides a culturally validated role that contributes to self-definition and belonging (Burke & Stets, 2009). Individuals who strongly internalize family-related identities tend to form clearer and earlier fertility intentions and are more likely to realize them (Bernardi, 2003; Toulemon & Mazuy, 2004).

Recent research suggests that these perspectives are complementary rather than competing. Luppi et al. (2025b) show that the perceived self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing reflects both individual value systems and structural constraints, while Schmidt (2024), drawing on qualitative evidence from Austria, demonstrates that beliefs about children as necessary for a fulfilling life are socially structured as much as personally experienced. In contemporary societies that emphasize autonomy and life planning, childbearing thus becomes a deeply meaningful yet carefully evaluated life project.

Recent qualitative evidence further complicates this picture. Bazzani et al. (2026) claim that even the most advantageous institutional context does not translate into systematically higher fertility intentions. This happens because fertility intentions are often hindered by ideals of self-realization and autonomy—values closely associated with postmaterialist orientations—and by concerns that parenthood might constrain personal freedom and career development.

Empirical Evidence on Associations Among Postmaterialism, Fertility, and Family Policies

Drawing on Inglehart's (1977, 1990) theory of value change, postmaterialism refers to a shift in individual priorities from material survival and social conformity toward self-expression, personal autonomy, and pluralism, as economic security and educational attainment increase (Inglehart, 2007). Inglehart and Welzel's (2005) broader analysis of value change confirms that as societies become more economically developed and democratic, fertility behavior becomes more reflective of self-directed values, and less responsive to traditional norms or institutional incentives.

This cultural transformation is strongly associated with many indicators of the Second Demographic Transition framework, which links family diversification to broader ideational shifts (Surkyn & Lesthaeghe, 2004; Sobotka et al., 2011; van de Kaa, 2001). In this context, childbearing is no longer considered a normative life-course obligation, but one option among many for achieving personal fulfillment and identity realization (Lesthaeghe, 2010).

However, postmaterialism, as theorized by Inglehart, has faced sustained critique on both conceptual and empirical grounds. Conceptually, scholars have noted that the construct overlaps considerably with broader frameworks like postmodernism, individualization, and self-expression values (van de Kaa, 2001). This overlap raises the question of whether postmaterialism represents a distinct value dimension or merely a narrower expression of wider cultural transformations in advanced societies. Empiri-

cally, at the macro level, although postmaterialism correlates with changing partnership dynamics—such as rising cohabitation, delayed marriage, and non-traditional family forms—its direct association with fertility levels is less explored. A recent micro-level study from Anisin (2025) offers empirical evidence of the associations between postmaterialism and fertility preferences at the individual level. The study reports that postmaterialist value holders are significantly more likely to perceive life without children as equally meaningful and to resist normative pronatalist pressures. Author claim that this result is in favor of the idea that—at the individual level—postmaterialism weakens the social desirability of parenthood, supports higher tolerance for non-parental lifestyles, and fosters reproductive autonomy—particularly among highly educated women. However, as previously noted, it is difficult to determine whether postmaterialism itself is associated with lower fertility preferences, or whether this relationship is spurious, driven instead by the correlation between postmaterialism and other postmodern value dimensions, such as individualism, secularism, or gender egalitarianism.

At the same time, materialist/postmaterialist orientations have been found associated with policy preferences (e.g., Goerres & Tepe, 2012; Hoefer, 1988; Lafferty & Knutsen, 1985). These studies are mainly at the macro level, supporting the idea that a progression towards postmaterialism is in favor to policies that expand personal choice and gender equality, such as flexible parental leave, accessible childcare, or reproductive rights. In this sense, postmaterialism rather than explaining fertility outcomes directly, it helps explain why certain pronatalist or family-support policies are more politically legitimate or socially acceptable in some societies than others.

Importantly, however, some forms of support—particularly public childcare—may appeal to both groups, albeit for different reasons. For materialists, accessible childcare primarily serves as an insurance mechanism against income loss or career interruption following parenthood, thereby preserving economic stability (Corneo & Grüner, 2002; Cusack et al., 2006; Goerres & Tepe, 2012; Rehm, 2009). For postmaterialists, by contrast, the same provision may also carries strong ideological significance: by facilitating work-family balance (Thévenon & Gauthier, 2011) it can enable more egalitarian family arrangements and support personal autonomy (especially for women; Esping-Andersen, 2009), thus making parenthood compatible with a more “holistic” self-realization and non-traditional life courses. As a result, the positive effect of welfare state support on self-fulfillment meaning of childbearing—especially through childcare services—should be stronger among postmaterialists, for whom the economic benefits of such policies are reinforced by a sense of ideological and value-based congruence.

Thus, postmaterialism can shape how individuals interpret the costs and benefits of parenthood. Rather than emphasizing economic or security-related motivations, postmaterialist individuals tend to evaluate childbearing through lenses of emotional meaning, life satisfaction, and personal growth—criteria that have been found relevant for taking childbearing decisions in contemporary low fertility contexts (Gauthier & de Jong, 2021; Hakim, 2003; Luppi, 2016; Mencarini et al., 2018). In a context where parenthood competes with aspirations for career development, self-actualization, and leisure, the perceived “opportunity costs” of children can be particularly

high (Liefbroer, 2005; Thévenon & Luci, 2012), because they inhibit individual's full self-fulfillment.

Hypotheses

Drawing on the TPB-SDT integrated model (in particular: Ajzen, 1991; Luppi et al., 2026; Ryan & Deci, 2000), we conceptualize individual values (in this case, materialism-postmaterialism) as antecedents of childbearing motives and perceived childbearing relevance—specifically, the extent to which having children is viewed as part of achieving a self-fulfilling life—which in turn shape fertility intentions. Expectations regarding welfare-state support with childcare are treated as contextual drivers whose association is moderated by the individual's level of postmaterialism in influencing both the motivational level (self-fulfillment relevance) and the intention level (3-years fertility intentions; Fig. 1).

Building on this framework, we derive two main hypotheses concerning the associations between materialist-postmaterialist values, the perceived relevance of childbearing for self-fulfillment, fertility intentions, and the role of expected welfare state support for childcare.

The first hypothesis deals with the relationship between postmaterialism, perceived welfare state support, and the relevance of childbearing for self-fulfillment in life (*moderation hypothesis*). We expect that when generous welfare provisions supporting parents with childcare are perceived to be available—such as subsidized childcare—they can be associated with a perception of childbearing as a realistic and personally meaningful choice, especially for people scoring higher on postmaterialism. This is because the convergence between supportive childcare policies and post-materialists' needs may make parenthood more attractive, not despite it but because

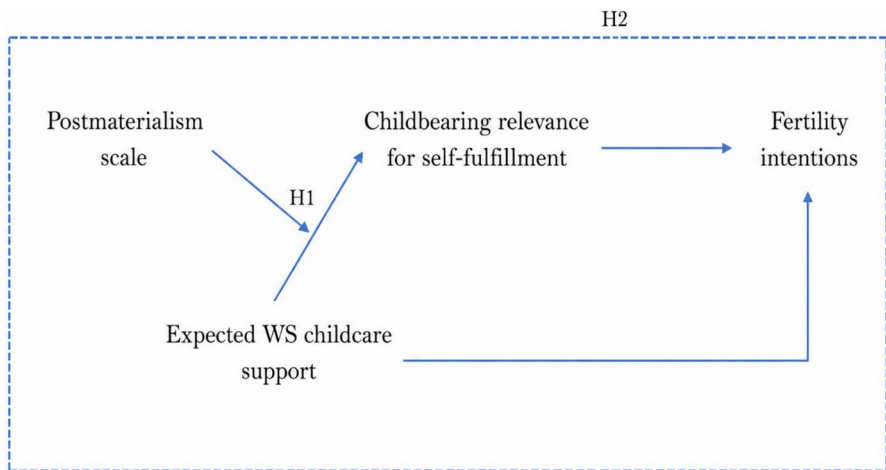


Fig. 1 Hypothesized Associations Between Expected Welfare State Support for Childcare and Fertility Intentions: The Moderating Role of Postmaterialism and the Mediating Role of Childbearing Relevance for a Self-Fulfilling Life (Hypotheses 1 and 2)

of its potential to contribute to self-fulfillment. From these considerations, we derive our first hypothesis:

H1 *When individuals expect effective welfare state support for childcare, those with higher postmaterialist values are, on average, more likely to view childbearing as a source of self-fulfillment than similarly postmaterialist individuals who do not expect adequate childcare support from the welfare state. We do not expect such differences among individuals with lower levels of postmaterialism.*

The second hypothesis concerns the association between postmaterialist values, expected welfare-state childcare support, the self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing, and fertility intentions (*mediation hypothesis*). If the previous hypothesis holds, perceived welfare-state support may be related not only to the practical conditions of childrearing (direct channel), but also to how individuals evaluate parenthood itself (indirect channel). In this framework, the direct effect of childcare provision on fertility intentions is expected to be value-neutral: it simply provides more resources to manage childrearing. The indirect effect, instead, is expected to rise when there is a value-institution (mis)alignment: for example, when individuals anticipate low levels of welfare support, highly postmaterialist respondents may be less likely to view childbearing as central to a fulfilling life, and this lower perceived relevance may correspond to lower fertility intentions. From these expectations, we derive the following hypothesis:

H2 *Among those scoring higher on postmaterialism, the association between expected welfare-state childcare support and fertility intentions is partly accounted for by the significance attributed to childbearing for individual self-realization. Among those reporting lower levels of postmaterialism, instead, we expect the direct association to be more relevant than the indirect one.*

Data and Methods

We rely on unique data from the *Rapporto Giovani* (Youth Report) survey, conducted in June 2022 on a representative sample of 5000 European young adults, aged 18–34 (2000 respondents in Italy, 1000 respondents in each of the following countries: France, Germany, and Spain). Data has been collected by IPSOS agency using computer-assisted web interviewing and computer-assisted telephone interviewing. Sample representativeness of the original population is based on quotas calculated on the distribution of some socio-demographic variables in the target population (i.e.,

gender, age, level of education, employment status, region of residence at NUTS1 level, municipality size) on which also sampling weights have been calculated.¹

We specifically consider childless individuals aged 25 to 34 (2,616 observations), as this subgroup is situated in the prime childbearing window where fertility intentions are most likely to translate into behavior. This focus minimizes heterogeneity introduced by younger adults aged 18–24, whose intentions are often unstable or oriented toward postponement, and by individuals who have already become parents, for whom parity-specific dynamics would complicate the interpretation of first-birth intentions. Moreover, by focusing only on childless individuals, we seek to capture childbearing meaning and fertility intentions that pertain specifically to the transition to parenthood, thereby avoiding the confounding influence of parity-specific factors (e.g., experiences with previous children) that shape both intentions and the relevance attributed to having children.

Measures

Outcome variables Our dependent variable for H1 assesses the *individual's importance attributed to childbearing for self-realization in life*. It is constructed based on respondents' selections from four provided statements:

1. I think that I would have a fulfilled life even without children
2. I think I would have a fulfilled life only with one child
3. I think I would have a fulfilled life only with two children
4. I think I would have a fulfilled life only with a large family (at least three children)

The survey asked to the respondent to select the option that fits more with her/his perception. To enhance the interpretability of our results, we dichotomize this variable into two categories. The first category (which takes value 0) encompasses respondents who indicated that they believe they would have a fulfilled life even without children [option 1]; the second category (which takes value 1) comprises respondents who chose any of the other options. Focusing on those indicating that they can have a fulfilled life without children versus those for whom a fulfilled life includes parenthood facilitates a focused examination of the presence or absence of such motive for childbearing. Our measure does not capture intrinsic motivation in this full SDT sense, as the survey does not include a validated multidimensional scale of childbearing motivation. Rather, it captures a narrower but theoretically relevant component: whether childbearing is perceived as necessary for a self-fulfilling life. We therefore use the term self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing to indicate a meaning-based evaluation of parenthood, not a direct measure of intrinsic motivation.²

¹ Sampling weights were constructed to adjust the sample to the reference population. Specifically, the weights align the sample distribution with Eurostat population benchmarks for the variables used in the quota design, such as age, gender, and country-specific demographic characteristics.

² This item has been used in recent research on parenthood and self-fulfillment among young adults. Luppi and colleagues (2025b), using the Youth Report survey, interpret the same item as a proxy of intrinsic motivation and show that this dimension adds a distinct layer to standard measures of fertility preferences, such as desires, expectations, and intentions.

The dependent variable for H2 measures *fertility intentions*: data are collected through the question “Do you intend to have a (another) child in the next three years?”, with four response categories: (1) certainly no, (2) probably no, (3) probably yes, and (4) certainly yes. This is the typical question for asking medium-term fertility intentions, avoiding a life-time perspective, which would make the reported intentions much closer to more abstract desires. For analytical purposes, the four response categories were recoded into a binary indicator distinguishing between negative fertility intentions (certainly/probably no) and positive fertility intentions (probably/certainly yes). The survey did not include a separate “undecided” or “don’t know” option for this item.

Main covariates *Post-materialist values* were measured using the 12-item version of the Inglehart index as implemented in the European/World Values Study (Inglehart & Abramson, 1999; see Table S1 in the Online Supplement for the full list of items). It is designed to capture the extent to which people prioritize postmaterialist values—such as autonomy, freedom of expression, participation, and environmental protection—over more traditional materialist concerns like economic stability, national security, and social order. The instrument consists of three separate batteries (four items each). Within each battery, respondents are asked to indicate their first and second priority. Each battery includes two materialist (M) and two post-materialist (PM) items:

1. Materialist items emphasize economic security, social order, and physical safety (e.g., high economic growth; strong defense forces; maintaining order; fighting rising prices; economic stability; fighting crime).
2. Post-materialist items emphasize self-expression, participation, autonomy, and quality of life (e.g., greater say in workplace and community decisions; protecting freedom of speech; a more humane society; ideas counting more than money; beautification of cities and countryside).

Thus, the classification of items into materialist versus post-materialist follows Inglehart’s original theoretical framework. In the original categorical index, individuals are classified based on the number of post-materialist priorities selected among their top choices. However, in the present study we construct a continuous post-materialism score, aimed at capturing the degree of postmaterialist orientation rather than distinguishing categorically between postmaterialists and materialists (continuous postmaterialism indices have been created also by e.g., Cui et al., 2023; Davis et al., 1999; Doyle & Richardson, 2025; Jordaan & Dima, 2020) in order to retain more information and increase statistical variability in the regression models. Specifically, for each battery we computed a score ranging from 1 to 4 depending on the combination and ordering of materialist and post-materialist selections (following the official World Values Study coding scheme). Higher values within each battery reflect a stronger relative preference for post-materialist goals. The three battery scores were then summed, resulting in a final continuous index ranging from 3 to 12, with higher scores indicating a stronger post-materialist orientation. This continuous specification preserves the ordinal logic of the ranking task while providing greater sensitivity than the traditional categorical typology.

About the *expected level of welfare state support for childcare* (WS), individuals answer to questions on their expectations that—in case of childbearing—they will be adequately supported by the welfare state: “If you had children (other children), how much could you rely on support for childcare from the welfare state?”, with possible answers ranking from 1 (a lot) to 4 (not at all). The variable has been recategorized into a dummy, taking value 1 in case respondent answers 1 (A lot) or 2 (Quite a bit) vs 0 in case they answer 3 (A little) or 4 (Not at all).

Control variables Finally, socio-demographic variables that are associated with fertility intentions in existing research are included/considered as control variables: *age* (in classes as used to calculate the sampling quotas: 25–29 and 30–34), *woman* (vs man); for the level of education we consider a dummy contrasting those with a *tertiary degree* to those without; *employment condition* (Neet, student, manager/professional, other self-employed, permanent employee, temporary employee, project-based/casual worker), and *country* of residence (Italy, France, Spain, Germany). Being in *stable partnership* (vs not being in a stable partnership) is also included as a control variable because having a stable partner is strongly related to the timing and feasibility of fertility intentions among childless young adults. Sample distribution of the dependent variables, the covariates and the control variables across countries is in the Online Supplement (Table S2).³

Analytical Approach

The *first step* of the analysis aimed to explore the relationships hypothesized in H1, employing logistic regression models in which the perceived relevance of childbearing for self-fulfillment served as the dependent variable. For the model testing H1, the expectation of welfare state support for childcare was included as the key independent variable alone and interacted with postmaterialism index (entered both linearly and quadratically), hypothesized to be associated with the perception that childbearing is necessary for achieving self-fulfillment. The quadratic specification of the postmaterialism index has been included to allow for the possibility that the association between postmaterialism and fertility-related motivations is not strictly monotonic. Theoretical arguments suggest that individuals located at intermediate levels of postmaterialism may differ from those at the extremes in how they reconcile autonomy-oriented values with parenthood. A quadratic term enables us to test whether the relationship follows a curvilinear pattern rather than imposing a linear structure. To formally assess whether this specification improves model fit relative to a linear alternative we used likelihood-ratio tests and joint significance tests of the quadratic terms. In the model, all control variables were included and sampling weights were applied.

The *second step* of the analysis served as a bridge between the descriptive tests of H1 and the formal mediation analysis designed to evaluate H2. Specifically, before estimating the full moderated mediation model, we first examined whether expected

³ No observations were excluded due to missing data. The dataset provided by Ipsos included only respondents with complete information on the variables used in the analyses; therefore, the analytical sample corresponds to the original sample available to the authors, with no additional listwise deletion or imputation.

welfare state support interacted with postmaterialism index, was directly associated with the intention to have a child within the next three years. This preliminary check is important because mediation can only be meaningfully tested if there is an association—either direct or indirect—between the predictor and the outcome.

To this end, we estimated two logistic regression models:

1. A baseline specification excluding the hypothesized mediator—i.e., childbearing self-fulfillment relevance—and including the interaction effect between postmaterialism and perceived welfare state support;
2. An extended specification including childbearing self-fulfillment relevance as an additional covariate; this model measures the *direct association* between perceived welfare state support and fertility intentions, moderated by the level of postmaterialism.

The comparison between these two models provides an initial indication of whether the association between expected welfare-state support, postmaterialism, and fertility intentions changes after accounting for the proposed mediator. If the inclusion of self-fulfillment reduces the strength of the interaction effect, this would be consistent with partial mediation. If, instead, the inclusion of self-fulfillment strengthens the interaction, this may suggest a suppression pattern, which still warrants a formal mediation test. Either way, this step is not intended to provide definitive evidence of mediation, but rather to establish whether the conditions are in place for mediation to be tested formally through structural equation modeling.

Finally, the *third step* aimed at empirically testing our second hypothesis (H2). We estimated a moderated mediation model using Generalized Structural Equation Modeling (GSEM) in *Stata 18*, which allows for the simultaneous estimation of multiple pathways while appropriately handling binary outcome variables through logit link functions. Our primary outcome of interest is fertility intentions, operationalized as the intention to have a child within the next three years (binary). The key explanatory variable is the individual's perceived welfare state support for childcare (binary). The mediating variable is the perceived self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing (binary), measuring the extent to which individuals view having children as essential to personal fulfillment.

A central feature of our model is the inclusion of as a moderating factor, the level of postmaterialism (PM; continuous)—which we center on its sample mean (7.5) to facilitate interpretation of interaction and quadratic terms—which conditions both the direct link between perceived welfare state support and fertility intentions and its indirect association through self-fulfillment relevance. Both the linear and quadratic terms of postmaterialism, and their interactions with the moderator, are included in the mediator and outcome equations to capture potential non-linearities and moderation relations. In addition to these main variables, the model incorporates a set of socio-demographic controls (i.e., gender, age group, level of education, stable partnership status, employment condition, and country of residence) which enter both the mediator and outcome equations to adjust for relevant confounders.

Formally, let X_c denote centered postmaterialism ($X - 7.5$), W the indicator of expected childcare support, M the binary mediator, and Y the binary outcome. The mediator equation is:

$$\text{logit}[P(M = 1)] = \alpha_0 + \alpha_1 X_c + \alpha_2 X_c^2 + \alpha_3 W + \alpha_4 (X_c \times W) + \alpha_5 (X_c^2 \times W) + C\gamma \quad (1)$$

and the outcome equation:

$$\text{logit}[P(Y = 1)] = \beta_0 + \beta_1 M + \beta_2 X_c + \beta_3 X_c^2 + \beta_4 W + \beta_5 (X_c \times W) + \beta_6 (X_c^2 \times W) + C\delta \quad (2)$$

where C represents the vector of socio-demographic control variables; α_0 and β_0 are the intercepts; $\alpha_{01} - \alpha_5$ and $\beta_1 - \beta_6$ are the corresponding model coefficients; and γ and δ represent the coefficient vectors associated with the control variables.

The conditional indirect association between postmaterialism and fertility intentions at a given value x_c of centered PM and moderator level z ($0 = \text{no expected childcare support}$; $1 = \text{expected childcare support}$) is computed as:

$$IE(x_c, z) = [(\alpha_1 + \alpha_4 z)x_c + (\alpha_2 + \alpha_5 z)x_c^2] \times \beta_1 \quad (3)$$

To estimate these indirect associations and their sampling variability, we employ nonparametric bootstrapping with 500 replications, resampling the full dataset and re-estimating the GSEM model in each replication (using an authors' custom program in *Stata 18*). The sampling distribution of indirect associations is typically non-normal, especially in finite samples and when interaction or nonlinear terms are present (MacKinnon et al., 2004). Standard errors derived from the delta method assume asymptotic normality and often yield biased inference for mediation models. By relying on bootstrapping, we avoid these distributional assumptions by repeatedly resampling the data and re-estimating the model, thereby generating an empirical approximation of the sampling distribution of the indirect association. Thus, we obtained bias-corrected standard errors and confidence intervals for the point estimates of $IE(x_c, z)$ at specific values of postmaterialism and the moderator, without relying on normality assumptions for the indirect links (Bollen & Stine, 1990). Analyses by gender were also performed, but differences emerged only rarely and were small in magnitude. For this reason, they are not reported in this study.

Given the binary specification of the mediator and outcome and of the cross-sectional nature of the data, the estimates from the moderated mediation model may be affected in their size and precision, even though they cannot be interpreted as evidence of causal mediation. In our work, GSEM is used as a theory-guided tool to assess whether the observed associations between postmaterialism, expected welfare-state childcare support, childbearing self-fulfillment relevance, and fertility intentions are consistent with the proposed value-institution alignment perspective. At the same time, we acknowledge that dichotomization reduces variation in the original response categories and may affect the estimated associations. The estimated direct and indirect components should therefore be read as conditional associations, not as causal effects.

Results

Descriptive Characteristics of the Analytic Sample

Table 1 presents the weighted descriptive characteristics of the analytic sample ($N = 2,616$). Overall, 40.75% of respondents intended to have a child within the next three years, whereas 59.25% reported no such intention. Nearly two thirds (62.05%) considered childbearing relevant to a self-fulfilling life, while 37.95% did not. Expected welfare-state support for childcare was comparatively uncommon: 28.93% of respondents expected adequate support, whereas 71.07% did not. The mean postmaterialism score was 7.03. Women accounted for 53.22% of the sample, and the age distribution was relatively balanced between respondents aged 25–29 (51.85%) and those aged 30–34 (48.15%). Most respondents were in a stable partnership (61.33%), while 31.83% held a tertiary degree. Regarding employment status, permanent employees constituted the largest group (34.62%), followed by respondents neither studying

Table 1 Sample distribution across the main covariates and control variables (Weighted Frequencies)

	N	%
<i>Fertility intention (3 years)</i>		
Not intending to have a child (0)	1550	59.25
Intending to have a child (1)	1066	40.75
<i>Childbearing motive (self-fulfillment)</i>		
No self-fulfillment (0)	993	37.95
Self-fulfillment (1)	1623	62.05
<i>Expected welfare state support for childcare</i>		
Not expected (0)	1859	71.07
Expected (1)	757	28.93
<i>Postmaterialism index (mean)</i>	7.03	
<i>Gender</i>		
Men (0)	1224	46.78
Women (1)	1392	53.22
<i>Level of Education</i>		
No tertiary degree (0)	1783	68.17
Tertiary degree (1)	833	31.83
<i>Age class</i>		
25–29	1356	51.85
30–34	1260	48.15
<i>Partnership</i>		
No stable partner (0)	1012	38.67
Stable partner (1)	1604	61.33
<i>Employment condition</i>		
No studying, no working	608	23.25
Studying	418	16.01
Manager or professional	147	5.65
Other self-employed	84	3.23
Employee – permanent	905	34.62
Employee – fixed-term	338	12.95
Project-based & casual work	116	4.3
Total	2616	100

nor working (23.25%), students (16.01%), and fixed-term employees (12.95%); the remaining employment categories each accounted for less than 6% of the sample.

Associations Between Expected Welfare State Support, Postmaterialism, and Childbearing Self-Fulfillment Relevance

The results from the logistic regressions support H1. On average, childless individuals scoring higher on the postmaterialism index (PM) who do not expect welfare state support for childcare are significantly less likely to regard parenthood as essential to a self-fulfilling life compared with both individuals scoring lower on PM and highly postmaterialist individuals who anticipate substantial institutional support. Among the latter, the perceived importance of childbearing is comparable to that of individuals with lower levels of PM (Fig. 2; full results in Table S3 in the Online Supplement). Consistently, the association between expected policy support and the self-fulfillment motive for having children varies along the PM index: it is negligible at lower PM levels, but becomes positive and statistically significant at higher values.

A likelihood-ratio test comparing linear and quadratic specifications of PM index indicates that the inclusion of quadratic terms significantly improves model fit (LR $\chi^2(2) = 10.20$, $p = 0.006$). A joint test of the quadratic terms is likewise significant ($\chi^2(2) = 10.27$, $p = 0.006$), confirming the presence of a non-linear association between postmaterialism and fertility-related motivations.

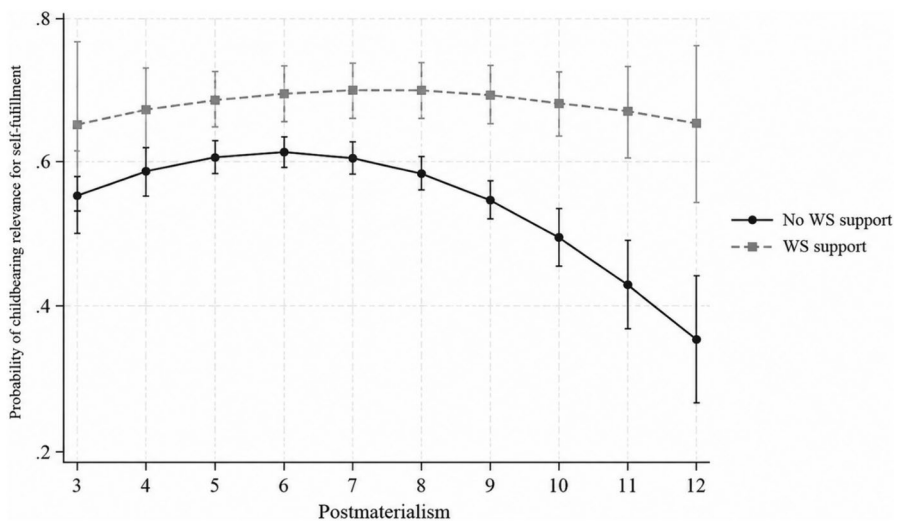


Fig. 2 Probability of Considering Having at Least One Child a Prerequisite for a Self-Fulfilling Life by Postmaterialism and Expected Welfare State Support for Childcare Among Childless Individuals Aged 25–34. Predicted probabilities from logit model (95% CIs), controlling for: age, gender, level of education, employment status, partnership status, country of residence. Full results in the Online Supplement, Table S3

Associations Between Expected Welfare State Support, Childbearing Self-Fulfillment Relevance, and Fertility Intentions

Before turning to the moderated mediation analysis, we examined whether expected welfare state support with childcare, in interaction with the PM index, is associated with the intention to have a child within the next three years. Two logistic regression models were estimated:

1. Model 1: without the hypothesized mediator (i.e., self-fulfillment relevance), and
2. Model 2: including self-fulfillment relevance as a covariate.

In Model 1, the highest predicted probabilities of intending to have a child occur among individuals with medium PM scores who expect childcare support from the welfare state (Fig. 3; Table S4 in the Online Supplement). Not expecting such support reduces the probability by up to 16 percentage points for those at PM = 8. In supportive contexts, individuals scoring higher or lower on the PM scale are less likely to intend a short-term birth than those at mid-range PM, by as much as 25 percentage points. In non-supportive contexts, the drop in probability is steeper for those scoring high on PM when compared to those at mid-range and low PM scores (− 14 percentage points between PM = 7 and PM = 12).

In Model 2, self-fulfillment relevance is strongly and positively associated with fertility intentions (coef. = 1.661, $p < .001$; see Table 2). Notably, including the mediator increases both the size and statistical significance of the PM $\times$ WS interaction

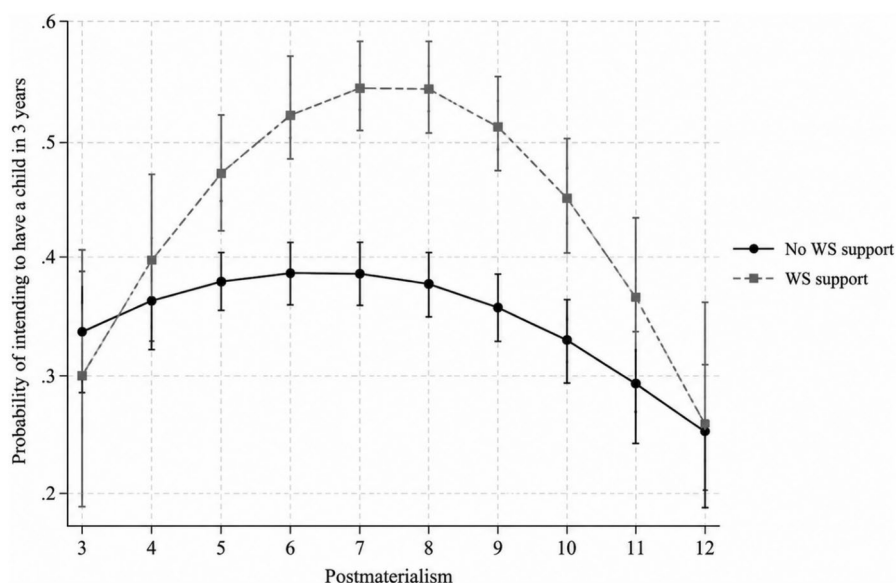


Fig. 3 Probability of Intending to Have a Child Within the Next 3 Years by Postmaterialism and Expected Welfare State Support for Childcare Among Childless Individuals Aged 25–34 (Model 1). Predicted probabilities from logit model (95% CIs), controlling for: age, gender, level of education, employment status, partnership status, country of residence (see Table S4 in the Online Supplement)

Table 2 Logistic regression estimates of the intention to have a child within the next three years (Childless Individuals Aged 25–34), Without (Model 1) and With (Model 2) childbearing self-fulfillment relevance as a covariate

	Model 1		Model 2	
	Coeff	p-value	Coeff	p-value
Childbearing self-fulfillment			1.661 (0.118)	< 0.001
PM	0.289 (0.167)	0.083	0.124 (0.167)	0.456
PM ²	−0.023 (0.012)	0.051	−0.009 (0.012)	0.424
WS support	−1.776 (1.317)	0.178	−2.500 (1.367)	0.068
WS support by PM	0.650 (0.365)	0.075	0.863 (0.383)	0.025
WS support by PM ²	−0.041 (0.024)	0.079	−0.058 (0.026)	0.025
Woman (ref: men)	0.265 (0.097)	0.005	0.442 (0.107)	< 0.001
Tertiary degree (ref: no tertiary)	−0.063 (0.102)	0.538	−0.113 (0.109)	0.299
<i>Country (ref: Italy)</i>				
Germany	−0.568 (0.138)	< 0.001	−0.720 (0.149)	< 0.001
France	0.146 (0.137)	0.285	0.040 (0.146)	0.299
Spain	−0.029 (0.127)	0.819	−0.003 (0.138)	0.984
Age class 30–34 (ref: 25–29)	0.128 (0.097)	< 0.001	0.217 (0.105)	0.038
Stable partnership (ref: not in stable partnership)	0.986 (0.103)	< 0.001	0.905 (0.111)	< 0.001
<i>Employment condition (ref: NEET)</i>				
Studying	0.049 (0.184)	0.789	−0.144 (0.204)	0.479
Manager or professional	0.733 (0.225)	0.001	0.729 (0.241)	0.002
Other self-employed	0.774 (0.277)	0.005	0.737 (0.306)	0.016
Employee: permanent	0.718 (0.141)	< 0.001	0.683 (0.151)	< .001
Employee: fixed-term	0.266 (0.177)	0.134	0.274 (0.185)	0.138
Project-based and casual work	0.298 (0.250)	0.232	0.174 (0.263)	0.508

Coefficients are log-odds; standard errors in parenthesis. Both models control for age, gender, employment status, partnership status, and country of residence. *PM* postmaterialism; *PM²* quadratic term for postmaterialism; *WSsupport* expected welfare state support with childcare

(linear: from 0.650, $p = .075$ in Model 1, to 0.863, $p = .025$ in Model 2; quadratic: from -0.041 , $p = .079$ in Model 1, to -0.058 , $p = .025$ in Model 2). This pattern is characteristic of a suppression effect on the direct pattern: variance shared between the mediator and the interaction term was masking part of the moderation link, which becomes more apparent once the mediator is controlled. Although suggestive, these regression results cannot determine whether this suppression pattern is limited to the estimated direct association or also concerns the indirect association through the mediator. This motivates the formal decomposition reported next.

Figure 4 shows a “practical” (*direct*) relationship between not perceiving effective welfare-state support and fertility intentions, but only among individuals with mid-range levels of postmaterialism (full results in Table S5 in the Online Supplement). After accounting for the self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing, expected welfare-state support is associated with higher predicted fertility intentions mainly among individuals with mid-range levels of postmaterialism. At lower and higher levels of postmaterialism, the difference between those expecting and not expecting support is smaller and statistically less clear. This pattern suggests that the direct association between expected support and fertility intentions is concentrated around the middle of the value distribution, whereas at higher levels of postmaterialism the relevant pattern is more visible in the indirect association through self-fulfillment relevance, especially among those not expecting welfare-state support.

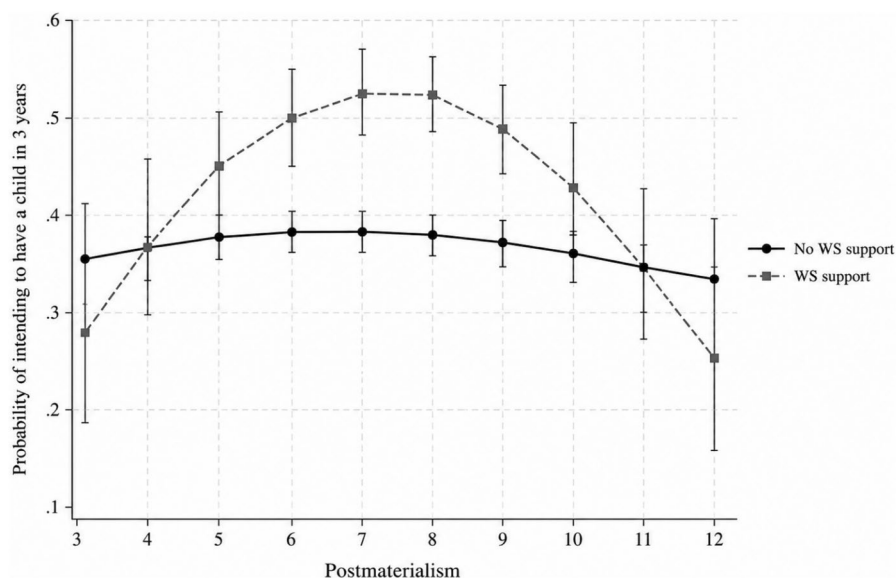


Fig. 4 Probability of Intending to Have a Child Within the Next 3 Years by Postmaterialism and Expected Welfare State Support for Childcare, Including Childbearing Relevance for a Self-Fulfilling Life as a Covariate, Among Childless Individuals Aged 25–34 (Model 2). Predicted probabilities from logit model (95% CIs) including self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing, controlling for: age, gender, employment status, partnership status, country of residence (see Table S5 in the Online Supplement)

Conditional Indirect Associations

To disentangle the direct and indirect association between PM, welfare state support expectations, and fertility intentions, we estimated a generalized structural equation model (GSEM) and obtained nonparametric bootstrapped confidence intervals for the conditional indirect associations. The PM index was mean-centered ($M = 7.5$), so that coefficients refer to associations at the sample mean, with deviations indicating higher scores or lower scores on PM. Conditional indirect associations were calculated for each integer value of PM (3–12), separately for respondents not expecting (WS0) and expecting (WS1) public childcare support.⁴

Among those not expecting support (WS0), the indirect link is close to zero around the PM mean but changes sign across the range (Table 3 and Fig. 5). It is significantly positive at low mid-range PM (e.g., $PM = 6$: 0.111, 95% CI = 0.038–0.184) and becomes significantly negative at higher PM (e.g., $PM = 10$: –0.488, 95% CI = –0.699 to –0.277; $PM = 12$: –1.152, 95% CI = –1.695 to –0.608). At $PM = 12$, the mediated association corresponds to an odds ratio of approximately 0.32, indicating a 68% reduction in the odds of intending a birth via *the mediator alone* relative to the mean PM value. By contrast, among those expecting support (WS1), the indirect association remains small and statistically indistinguishable from zero across the PM range; all 95% confidence intervals include zero.

Table 3 Bootstrapped conditional indirect associations of postmaterialism (PM) on fertility intentions via childbearing self-fulfillment, by PM level and welfare state (WS) support expectation

PM score	WS support not expected (WS0)				WS support expected (WS1)			
	Log-odds	SE	ci: lower bound	ci: upper bound	Log-odds	SE	ci: lower bound	ci: upper bound
3	–0.076	0.200	–0.468	0.315	0.129	0.364	–0.585	0.843
4	0.047	0.126	–0.201	0.294	0.130	0.233	–0.327	0.586
5	0.109	0.073	–0.034	0.252	0.114	0.135	–0.151	0.378
6	0.111	0.037	0.038	0.184	0.081	0.067	–0.050	0.212
7	0.052	0.012	0.028	0.076	0.031	0.020	–0.009	0.071
8	–0.067	0.014	–0.095	–i–0.040	–0.035	0.022	–0.079	0.008
9	–0.247	0.052	–0.350	–0.145	–0.119	0.080	–0.276	0.038
10	–0.488	0.108	–0.699	–0.277	–0.219	0.165	–0.541	0.104
11	–0.790	0.182	–1.147	–0.432	–0.336	0.281	–0.886	0.214
12	–1.152	0.277	–1.695	–i–0.608	–0.470	0.430	–1.312	0.373

Estimates are in log-odds; positive values indicate that the mediator increases the odds of intending a birth, negative values indicate the opposite. *SE* standard error. Significance is assessed by 95% bias-corrected bootstrap confidence intervals (CIs); associations are considered statistically significant only when CIs exclude zero

⁴As a robustness test, we re-estimated the model including postmaterialism as a linear term only. The linear specification produces significant indirect associations in the same direction (and, consistently with our results, only for WS0), indicating that the mediated association is not solely driven by the quadratic term. However, it imposes a monotonic structure and therefore does not account for the empirically observed curvature across postmaterialism levels. Full results from the linear specification are available from the authors upon request.

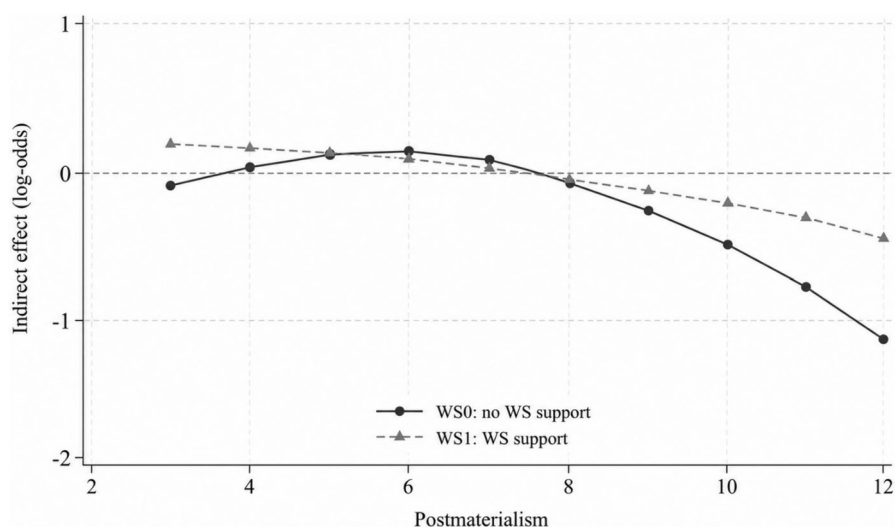


Fig. 5 Bootstrapped Conditional Indirect Associations of Expected Welfare State Support for Childcare With Fertility Intentions Through Childbearing Relevance for a Self-Fulfilling Life by Postmaterialism Among Childless Individuals Aged 25–34. Associations are plotted in log-odds; shaded bands represent 95% bias-corrected bootstrap CIs. The dark-grey series (WS0: WS no support expected) shows significant positive mediation at mid-PM levels and significant negative mediation at high PM, with CIs excluding zero (see Table 3). The dashed line (WS1: WS support expected) remains close to zero across the PM range, with all CIs crossing zero, indicating no statistically detectable mediation

Taken together with the previous regression results (Model 1 and 2 in Table 2), these findings indicate an *inconsistent mediation relation*—also known as competitive mediation (MacKinnon et al., 2000)—in which the indirect link via the mediator operates in the opposite direction to the direct association. In this case, in low-support environments, mid-range PM values are associated with a higher probability of seeing childbearing as an important source of self-fulfillment, which in turn corresponds to higher fertility intentions. For those scoring higher on PM in the same low-support contexts, the indirect association becomes negative, as lower self-fulfillment relevance is associated with lower fertility intentions. The coexistence of a null direct association and a negative indirect association is consistent with the inconsistent mediation pattern detected in the GSEM and with the fact that including the mediator in the regression analysis increased rather than diminished the interaction term (MacKinnon, 2008; MacKinnon et al., 2000; Preacher & Hayes, 2008). In substantive terms, this suggests that perceived institutional support may not only shape whether postmaterialist values translate into fertility-friendly or fertility-averse orientations, but it is also associated to the kind of pattern—direct or mediated through self-fulfillment—becomes dominant.

Supplementary Checks by Partnership Status

As a supplementary robustness check, we re-estimated the main models separately for respondents with and without a stable partner. The aim of this check is to assess

whether the value-institution mechanism identified in the main analysis is driven by differences in partnership composition.

The results indicate that the main pattern is more clearly visible among respondents in a stable relationship (see Figure S1 and Table S6 in the Online Supplement⁵). In this group, the associations between postmaterialism, expected welfare-state childcare support, the self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing, and fertility intentions follow the same substantive logic as in the full sample. In particular, the indirect associations are more pronounced among partnered respondents, for whom short-term fertility intentions are likely to be more concrete and closely connected to shared life planning.

Among respondents without a stable partner, the pattern is weaker and less clearly structured. This is not unexpected, since short-term fertility intentions may be less salient, less feasible, or more hypothetical in the absence of a stable partnership. For this group, the perceived self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing may still capture general meanings attached to parenthood, but its connection to near-term fertility intentions is likely to be less immediate.

Discussion and Conclusion

Our findings align with our initial expectations and resonate with emerging evidence in demographic and sociological literature. At least in the selected Western contexts, the fertility implications of institutional support should be understood in relation to its alignment with individual values and with the meanings attached to childbearing. Our results suggest that the expected contribution of childbearing to self-fulfillment is a central dimension in the association between perceived welfare-state support, postmaterialist values, and fertility intentions. More specifically, they indicate that the relationship between expected welfare-state support and fertility intentions is not uniform, but varies across the postmaterialism scale and according to perceived levels of institutional support.

The main pattern emerges among respondents who anticipate limited public support. For individuals scoring in the mid-range of the postmaterialism index, fertility intentions are indirectly associated with the fact that childbearing continues to be seen as an important source of self-fulfillment. By contrast, among highly postmaterialist respondents in the same perceived low-support context, the indirect association is negative: childbearing appears less central to a fulfilling life, and this is associated with lower fertility intentions. In practical terms, this means that a young adult with moderately postmaterialist values may still report an intention to have children if parenthood remains part of their idea of a fulfilling life, even in the absence of expected institutional support. A highly postmaterialist peer in the same context, instead, may report no fertility intention alongside a weaker perceived self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing. This pattern points to a value-institution misalignment penalty: when childcare support is not perceived as available, parenthood may appear less compatible with postmaterialist aspirations for autonomy, self-expression, and self-realiza-

⁵ Full results available upon request to the authors.

tion. The absence of support therefore does not merely leave practical constraints unresolved; it may also weaken the motivational meaning of childbearing as part of a fulfilling life.

Such findings are consistent with research showing that family policies are most effective when they are value-congruent, enabling individuals to reconcile parenthood with autonomy and self-realization (Botev, 2015; Gauthier, 2007; McDonald, 2000; Thévenon & Gauthier, 2011). At the same time, our results suggest a more nuanced interpretation of Anisin's (2025) findings: it is not postmaterialist orientation per se that reduces the appeal of childbearing, but rather the degree to which institutional support aligns with individuals' values. When such alignment occurs, it can sustain fertility intentions through the positive meaning attributed to parenthood; when it does not, it may weaken them.

Moreover, our results suggest distinct patterns across the rest of the value spectrum. Among those scoring lower on the postmaterialism scale, fertility intentions appear only weakly associated with expectations of welfare-state childcare support; for this group, expected support is not clearly related to the perceived self-fulfillment value of childbearing, and its direct association with fertility intentions remains limited. In contrast, individuals in the mid-range of the postmaterialism scale show the highest fertility intentions, particularly when they expect effective childcare support. For this group, the pattern is consistent with a more practical interpretation of welfare-state support, in which expected childcare provision is associated with positive fertility intentions without necessarily being strongly channeled through the self-fulfillment relevance of parenthood.

Thus, the main contribution of this study is to identify a specific motivational mechanism through which institutional contexts and value orientations jointly shape fertility intentions. By showing that the perceived self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing mediates this relationship, our findings underscore the need to integrate motivational and policy dimensions more systematically into explanations of fertility intentions and behavior.

Regarding theoretical implications, our results suggest the need to expand existing frameworks of fertility decision-making and policy evaluation by more systematically incorporating cultural orientations and subjective motivations. The self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing, in particular, emerges as a key mechanism through which values shape fertility intentions, sometimes reinforcing and sometimes counteracting structural influences. Recognizing such motivational pathways helps explain why the same value orientation can be associated with different fertility intentions depending on context. At the same time, exploring other value-related motivational patterns is crucial to better understand fertility drivers considering the cultural-complexity of contemporary societies.

On the policy side, evaluating the effectiveness of family policies solely on the basis of institutional design or economic incentives risk overlooking the role of the cultural and motivational dimensions. Our findings suggest that cultural pluralism in contemporary societies requires a pluralistic approach to family policy. Individuals differ not only in their material conditions but also in the meanings they attach to parenthood and the role of childbearing in their pursuit of self-fulfillment. A uniform, one-size-fits-all policy may therefore fail to resonate with significant segments of the

population. Instead, policy mixes that accommodate diverse preferences and needs—as exemplified by the variety of instruments available in France—are more likely to align with heterogeneous value orientations. Such pluralistic policy frameworks may enhance the capacity of institutions to support fertility intentions across groups who differ in their cultural orientations and life goals.

We also claim that our results point to several promising avenues for further research that could extend and refine the mechanisms identified in this study. First, the present analysis is based on cross-sectional data, which is well suited to examining the pattern of associations underlying the proposed framework. However, longitudinal evidence would provide an important opportunity to assess how these associations evolve over time and the extent to which fertility intentions translate into subsequent reproductive behavior. Future longitudinal or experimental designs would be also helpful to assess more directly the temporal ordering among involved dimensions and further strengthen causal interpretation. In fact, the association between postmaterialist values, perceived policy support, childbearing self-fulfillment relevance, and fertility intentions may be shaped by unobserved factors, and intentions themselves may influence how individuals report their expectations of welfare state support. For instance, childless young adults who do not intend to have children, or who have not yet seriously considered parenthood, may pay less attention to childcare policies and may therefore report weaker or less defined expectations regarding welfare-state support.

Second, the present study focuses on Inglehart's postmaterialism index because of its long tradition in comparative research. Although widely used, this index has been criticized for its sensitivity to survey context and period effects, as well as for capturing a relatively narrow dimension of value change. For this reason, future studies could usefully complement this perspective by considering additional cultural orientations: incorporating complementary measures—such as gender egalitarianism, individualism-collectivism, or family-related norms—would allow future research to explore whether similar motivational mechanisms operate across broader cultural value systems. Similarly, future research could investigate how different cultural orientations and media-mediated meanings of parenthood interact with perceived institutional support in shaping the self-fulfillment relevance of childbearing and fertility intentions.

Additionally, the present analysis focuses specifically on perceived childcare support as one salient dimension of institutional support. Extending the framework to other policy domains—including parental leave, income transfers and housing support—would help assess whether similar value-institution dynamics characterize different components of family policy and/or varies across key life-course phases.

Thus, another promising extension might consider fertility intentions as embedded in couple dimension, where the perceived feasibility of parenthood arises within a relational context. Being in a stable partnership may therefore shape not only the timing and salience of fertility intentions, but also the extent to which childbearing is perceived as compatible with self-fulfillment.

Further, it should be noticed that the timing of data collection is also relevant for interpreting these findings. The survey was fielded in June 2022, when the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic were still salient for family life, work-care

arrangements, and perceptions of childcare reliability. In many contexts, previous closures or disruptions of childcare facilities and schools may have made the reliability of welfare-state support more visible and salient to respondents. This is particularly important because our analysis focuses on perceived rather than objective policy support. Therefore, the findings should be read as associations observed in a post-pandemic context, in which expectations about childcare support may have been shaped by recent experiences of uncertainty rising cost-of-living and housing prices, and institutional disruption. Future waves collected under different macro-contexts will help assess the stability of the observed relationships.

On the same line, we want to highlight the fact that our findings speak to one specific micro-level value-institution mechanism among young childless adults in selected Western European welfare-state contexts. Childcare provision, in particular, varies between and within countries, and actual service supply may shape both expectations of institutional support and fertility-related motivations. However, our theoretical framework emphasizes perceived institutional support as the relevant mechanism linking cultural orientations to intrinsic motivation and fertility intentions. For childless individuals in particular, anticipated access to public childcare may matter more than objective provision, as reproductive decisions are based on expectations about future compatibility between parenthood and life goals. Larger comparative cross-country datasets, integrating contextual harmonized indicators of regional childcare provision, would make it possible to investigate how its magnitude varies across welfare regimes and cultural contexts.

Taken together, these extensions would help move fertility research toward a more comprehensive understanding of how values and policies interact at the individual level to shape both the meanings of parenthood and the reproductive intentions. Our results suggest that the fertility relevance of family policies cannot be understood only in terms of resources or incentives; it also depends on whether institutional support makes parenthood appear compatible with the different ways in which young adults imagine a meaningful and fulfilled life.

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