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# Preconditions to parenthood: changes over time and generations

Maja Bodin <sup>a,\*</sup>, Charlotta Holmström <sup>a</sup>, Lars Plantin <sup>a</sup>, Lone Schmidt <sup>b</sup>  
Søren Ziebe <sup>c</sup>, Eva Elmerstig <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Centre for Sexology and Sexuality Studies, Malmö University, Sweden; <sup>b</sup> Department of Public Health, University of Copenhagen, Denmark; <sup>c</sup> Fertility Clinic, Copenhagen University Hospital, Denmark

\* Corresponding author. E-mail address: [maja.bodin@mau.se](mailto:maja.bodin@mau.se) (M. Bodin).



**Maja Bodin** is a registered nurse-midwife with a PhD in reproductive health from Uppsala University, Sweden. Her research interests are reproductive decision-making, fertility awareness and gender issues. She is currently working as a postdoctoral research fellow at Malmö University.

**Abstract** Reproductive decision-making and fertility patterns change with time and place, and are influenced by contemporary societal factors. In this paper, we have studied biosocial aspects of reproductive decision-making over time and generations in a Nordic setting. The aim was to explore intergenerational changes and influences on decision-making, especially regarding preconditions to first birth. Twenty-six focus group interviews were conducted in southern Sweden, including a total of 110 participants aged 17–90 years. The analysis of the interviews resulted in six themes: (i) 'Providing security – an intergenerational precondition'; (ii) 'A growing smorgasbord of choices and requirements'; (iii) 'Parenthood becoming a project'; (iv) 'Stretched out life stages'; (v) '(Im)possibilities to procreate'; and (vi) 'Intergenerational pronatalism'. Our findings reflect increasing expectations on what it means to be prepared for parenthood. Despite increasing awareness of the precariousness of romantic relationships, people still wish to build new families but try to be as prepared as possible for adverse events. The findings also show how increasing life expectancy and medical advancements have come to influence people's views on their reproductive timeline.

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## Introduction

In the past decades, fertility rates have decreased and postponed parenthood has increased in many high-income countries (Schmidt et al., 2012). Reproductive decision-making and fertility patterns change with time and place, and are influenced by contemporary societal factors such as industrialization, economic stability, educational opportunities, gender equality, family values, access to contraceptive methods and quality of health care (Bernardi and Klärner, 2014; Dribe, 2009; Hakim, 2003). More recent fertility patterns can also be understood in relation to individualization processes and to increasingly stronger ideals of personal development and self-reflexivity that colour high-income countries. According to Anthony Giddens (1991), what defines individuals in late modern societies is that we regard ourselves as responsible for our actions and of what we make of ourselves, and we try to be in control of time since that (seemingly) enables us to live life more fully. The life course is regarded as a series of passages, where life-planning becomes highly important as 'the reflexive construction of self-identity depends as much on preparing for the future as on interpreting the past' (Giddens, 1991: 85). Reproductive decision-making is thus influenced by individualization on the one hand, and by structural preconditions and family norms on the other.

However, an individual's decision about whether, when and how to have children is also biosocial, in the sense that it is based on the interaction between perceptions of the social environment and one's biological functions (Martin, 2017). Thus, the decision often includes a negotiation between the biological and social aspects of aging (Bodin and Käll, 2020; Cooke et al., 2012; Hadley, 2018; Martin, 2017). As mentioned, parenthood has been postponed increasingly during the past decades in many countries. As a result, there is now growing concern, from a medical perspective, that the continuing trend of postponed parenthood will lead to a steady increase in involuntary childlessness due to fertility declining with increasing age (Mills et al., 2011). Here we can discern a conflict between social and biological preconditions to parenthood.

This paper addresses biosocial aspects of reproductive decision-making over time. The aim is to explore temporal changes and continuity with regard to reproductive decision-making, especially concerning the first birth. Central questions are: which preconditions to parenthood have changed and which have remained, and how can this development be understood in relation to changing and persisting societal norms and values?

## The Swedish context

This study was conducted in Sweden, one of the Nordic welfare states. In Sweden, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a dramatic drop in the total fertility rate from 4 to 1.5, and a similar decline was noted all over Europe. However, at the beginning of the 21st century, the Nordic countries stood out in comparison with many other countries as the fertility rates in these countries stabilized at around 1.7–2.0. According to a dominant theory, the stabilization was likely

a result of an adaption to a more gender-equal society, where women and men have (relatively) equal opportunities and support to combine work and family life (Esping-Andersen, 2016). This movement actually began in the 1960s, when attitudes towards sexuality, non-marital cohabitation and abortion changed, equality started to be discussed, and modern contraceptives were introduced (- Sundström-Feigenberg, 1987). Since the 1970s, the state has offered well-paid and extensive parental leave, child benefits and subsidized childcare to support parents. Hence, in combination with the expansion of higher education, the structural conditions for reproductive decision-making have changed.

Recently, however, the total fertility rates in the Nordic welfare states have started to decrease again, and the fertility patterns of the five Nordic countries have diverged (Hellstrand et al., 2020). While fertility rates are declining strongly in Iceland, Norway and Finland, the decline is smaller in Denmark and Sweden. The mechanisms behind the decline and the divergence are still unclear, but could, according to Hellstrand et al., be related to labour market insecurity and greater acceptance of childlessness.

## Timing of parenthood

At the introduction of modern contraceptives in Sweden in the late 1960s, attitudes towards birth control changed radically (Sundström-Feigenberg, 1987). Modern contraceptives were accompanied by the attitude that all children have the right to be welcomed, which led to increasing numbers of legal abortions among young women. However, according to Sundström-Feigenberg (1987), the increased use of birth control did not so much affect fertility rates as it affected the timing of parenthood.

Before entering parenthood, people wish to feel ready and prepared (Bergnéhr, 2008; Hviid Malling et al., 2020; Sundström-Feigenberg, 1987). Boivin et al. (2018) discuss readiness to conceive as dependent on preconditions (e.g. economic stability, personal and relational readiness) and motivational forces (e.g. social status of parents, personal fulfilment). Economic stability stands out as a universally important precondition for the timing of parenthood, particularly for young people living in northern Europe (Boivin et al., 2018). Having a stable job is also relevant in the Swedish context because parental leave allowance is based on previous earnings.

Education is included in the precondition 'economic stability', and length of education has a clear impact on the timing of parenthood. In Sweden, 9 years of education became compulsory in 1962; before this time, most women had no more than 6 years of education. Today, 50% of all women aged 25–64 have more than 12 years of education (Statistics Sweden, 2020). Simultaneously, the mean age of having their first child has increased by 1 year per decade since the 1970s. Now, women and men are aged, on average, 29.6 years and 31.8 years, respectively, when having their first child. The mean age varies by a few years between regions and socio-economic groups, and women with a university degree have children 4 years later than women who have a high school education or less. Socio-economic group also plays a role in the sense that young

**Table 1** Characteristics of the 26 focus groups ( $n = 110$  participants).

Age range of group	Group 1 (educational level)	Group 2 (educational level)	Group 3 (educational level)
17–19	High-school students (vocational)	Male high-school students (vocational)	Female high-school students (natural sci.)
20–24	University students/employed (low)	Female university students	–
25–29	Female university students	Female university students	Employed (low)
30–34	Mothers (mixed)	Students/employed (high)	Men (high)
35–39	Parents (high)	Mothers (high)	Child-free (high)
40–49	Parents (high)	Mothers and child-free men (mixed)	Women who became mothers after 35 years of age (mixed)
50–59	Men with or without children (mixed)	Parents (mixed)	Fathers (low)
60–69	Mothers (mixed)	Mothers (high)	Mothers (mixed)
≥70+	Mothers (mixed)	Mothers (high)	Fathers (mixed)

adults are influenced by their peers and siblings in the timing of their first birth (Bergnéhr, 2009; Lyngstad and Prskawetz, 2010), as social groups define their own logics of how and when to enter parenthood (Wissö, 2019). Inter-generational (parent–child) influences on reproductive decision-making in modern times are less clear, as the topic has received little research attention in the Nordic countries.

In several high-income countries, there has been an increase in the number of women who have their first child after 35 and 40 years of age during the 21st century (Friese et al., 2008; Statistics Sweden, 2020). Friese et al. (2008) argue that delayed childbearing has become part of the profile of a new middle age, which has been made possible partly through medically assisted reproduction (MAR). However, people commonly overestimate their chances of becoming pregnant, both spontaneously and through MAR (Pedro et al., 2018), and having children after 35 years of age is seldom what people initially wanted or planned (Cooke et al., 2012). Instead, being childless at 35 years of age is usually attributed to a history of fertility problems, not feeling mature enough, not having found the right partner, a wish to do other things first, or a mere lack of desire to have children (Friese et al., 2008; Schytt et al., 2014).

Childlessness is becoming increasingly common among men in the Nordic countries (Jalovaara et al., 2018; Jensen, 2013), and in Sweden, it is most common among men with a low education and low income (Boschini and Sundström, 2018; Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2019). Childlessness among women, on the other hand, is not increasing despite declining fertility rates, which means that there is an increase in women who have only one child (Statistics Sweden, 2016). The gender difference in childlessness could, to some extent, be explained by the fact that there are more options in Sweden for women to reproduce than for men. Since 2005, lesbian couples have had legal access to state-funded MAR if they wish to become parents, and this has also applied to single women since 2017. While gay couples and single men are allowed to

adopt children, surrogacy is still banned, which makes it more difficult for men to have children outside heterosexual arrangements.

## Materials and methods

This study was conducted in the county of Skåne in south-west Sweden, and was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority. The method used to collect data was age-specific focus group interviews (Krueger and Casey, 2015). Twenty-six group interviews were conducted between September 2019 and June 2020, including a total of 110 persons.

Participants were recruited through an advertisement on the university's website and on social media, through personal and professional networks, and through snowball sampling. The only inclusion criterion was to have sufficient language knowledge to be able to follow, and be active, in a discussion in Swedish. Eligible persons were given detailed oral and written information about the study purpose and procedure. Informed consent was obtained from all participants. The focus groups consisted of people who were not known to each other and/or people acquainted with each other. In the latter case, a key-person invited friends, neighbours, relatives or colleagues to form a group. Each group consisted of three to six participants who were approximately the same age (Table 1). The aim was to include people with backgrounds and experiences that were as varied as possible in order to obtain different views on family formation. However, despite several efforts, the final sample had an over-representation of Swedish-born, heterosexual, middle-class women. This means that their perspectives are more present in the material, but we have strived to find a balance between various perspectives in the presentation of our findings, and we also bring forth less-dominant voices.

The age intervals were made narrower in younger ages as age differences can be more sensitive in younger people

(Krueger and Casey, 2015). To be able to see patterns related to age, the aim was to include three groups per age interval. This goal was achieved for all ages except for age interval 20–25 years, where only two groups were interviewed due to difficulties in recruiting participants during the coronavirus disease 2019 pandemic. The pandemic also led to modifications in how interviews could be conducted, and three interviews had to be conducted online via video communication.

The first author, MB, moderated all interviews and CH, LP and EE took turns being observers in larger groups. Before the interviews started, participants filled out a short survey that included the question ‘In addition to the desire for children, what factors are important preconditions for having children?’, followed by 15 predetermined answers (factors that had been mentioned as important in previous studies on reproductive decision-making; see, for example, Boivin et al., 2018) and one open answer.

A semi-structured interview guide was used during interviews, from which two interview topics are relevant to this paper: (i) timing of parenthood; and (ii) reasons to have or not have children. Reflective field notes were made during and after each focus group session to assist with analysis. Interviews lasted for approximately 40–120 min. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. During transcription, the material was de-identified and participants were given pseudonyms.

Data were analysed thematically according to Braun and Clarke (2006) using the qualitative data analysis software NVivo Version 12. Data relevant to the research questions were identified and extracted by the first author, forming the dataset used for analysis. The dataset was then read several times, codes were noted in the margins, and preliminary themes were identified. After this, the themes were discussed with the co-authors, who had each read five interviews, to ensure reliability. The themes were thereafter modified and refined into the final themes presented below. Identification of themes was inductive and not theory-driven; however, analysis of the focus group interviews was guided by a social constructivist perspective and inspired by theories focusing on individualization and modern families (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Illouz, 2019; Johansson and Vikström, 2009).

The results include opinions and experiences of 110 persons aged 17–90 years (mean age 43 years). They self-identified as either women ( $n = 73$ ), men ( $n = 36$ ) or gender-fluid ( $n = 1$ ). Two of the men had gone through gender reassignment (female-to-male). Seven participants had migrated from another country (Norway, Finland, USA, Yugoslavia, Afghanistan, Iraq) and one had been adopted from South-east Asia. Among the Swedish-born, approximately one-third had migrated to Skåne from another region in Sweden. More than half of the participants were parents ( $n = 61$ ) and had had their first child somewhere between 19 and 40 years of age (mean 28 years). Among the 49 participants who did not have children, 37 wanted to become parents, six were unsure about their reproductive intentions, and six did not want to have children. Fifteen participants had, at some level, experienced difficulties in achieving a pregnancy or a live birth.

## Results

The thematic analysis produced six themes addressing how reproductive decision-making has developed over time: (i) ‘Providing security – an intergenerational precondition’; (ii) ‘A growing smorgasbord of choices and requirements’; (iii) ‘Parenthood becoming a project’; (iv) ‘Stretched out life stages’; (v) ‘(Im)possibilities to procreate’; and (vi) ‘Intergenerational pronatalism’.

### Providing security – an intergenerational precondition

Although not ranked as most important in the survey, providing security to your child through economic stability and permanent housing was often discussed as a fundamental precondition for parenthood. However, the conditions for creating this foundation had changed over time, as the labour and housing markets had become more insecure. Catarina (63) and her friends, who were all highly educated, had been confident that they would find a job straight after finishing their education:

Catarina (63): There was no doubt that you would get a job, and therefore it felt like that part was secure. And at that time, it was not like you were thinking ‘Will I ever find somewhere to live?’, as they have it today. Today it’s more ‘Should we have children and live separately with our parents?’ It’s a bit like that. We didn’t have to think about such practical things. There were rental apartments, it was possible to live fairly cheaply, reasonably decent, back then.

Anna-Lena (64): No, you were never worried about that, finding a home.

The image of a more accessible labour market in the 20th century was confirmed by 18-year-old Emma, who had experienced difficulties even in finding an internship during high school.

Her classmate Selma (18) agreed, saying that ‘Yes exactly, and then you feel no, then I am not ready to have children, because I cannot support my child’. Both Emma and Selma could not imagine themselves having children before finishing their university education. Selma had, however, noticed a new trend of young popular influencers on social media who had started to have children early, and believed that young women could get inspired when seeing that it is possible to have fun and travel after having a child. Being on parental leave from higher education, however, was described as unthinkable by students, partly due to financial and housing concerns, but also worries about not being able to focus on studies when having small children.

While the labour market seemed diffuse to young people in higher education, it was more clear-cut to the young people in vocational training. They were confident that they would get a job and probably (at least in male-dominated professions) be well paid. Being financially responsible was seen as a measure of maturity, and female students in vocational training had already started to save money for the future by working in their spare time. Starting higher educa-



tion straight after high school was seen as a hindrance as it would make it 'take too long to build a life'. However, some planned to pursue higher education later in life.

Many of the young adults expressed that they did not want to be 'old' parents, and some wanted to have children early because they were afraid that their parents would die before they could meet their grandchildren. Although some parents encouraged their children to have children early in life, the most common recommendation from parent to child was to wait, at least until they had finished their education and found employment. Adam (17) describes:

Adam (17): My father he was 21 and my mother was 23 [when they had me], and he said to me 'When you are going to have children, wait preferably until you are somewhere around 27 to 30'. Because he doesn't regret that he had me [heh], he doesn't, but he thought it was too early /... / He said 'Get out and travel, do stuff'. Of course, you can do it with children as well, but you may want to do it a little by yourself as well, with your friends, or improve your economy and make sure things are good around you as well and so on. So, he said 'Wait, you can do as you please, but wait, that's my tip, because I was quite young when I had children'.

Adam declared that he would follow his father's recommendation, even if all his friends had children early, which shows that young people may still be influenced by their parents' experiences and opinions.

### A growing smorgasbord of choices and requirements

When looking at the different generations, it is clear that decision-making has become a more complex phenomenon. To make conscious choices in all aspects of life was presented as a contemporary norm which could have a delaying effect on childbearing. Iris (26), a female student without children, described this change quite clearly:

Iris (26): It feels like today that we have so many choices to make, there are so many options, and sometimes you feel paralysed because there are so many options. I don't know, before maybe it was a little more delineated; you could turn a little, but the main path was here [showing a straight line with her hands].

It appears that younger generations have more decisions to make before entering parenthood than older generations had. One of the choices to make in relation to reproductive decision-making is the selection of partner. In all ages, finding the right partner and being in a loving relationship were ranked as the most important preconditions to parenthood. However, the process of finding a partner has changed over time. Participants in their mid-20s argued that, in earlier times, people seemed to settle with the first reasonable partner they found, but today people break up more easily, thinking that the next partner will probably be the right one. One young man claimed that if you meet someone when you are 18–19 years old today, it does not necessarily mean that you want to spend the rest of your life with that person, but it is more likely that you will feel that way if you meet when you are 30.

Most of the older participants, on the other hand, explained that they had not thought much about whether to have children or not, or when. It had usually been something 'that just happened' out of love and attraction. Many of them had found a partner in their late teens or early twenties, and they had become pregnant sooner or later. It should be said that this was not always a happy story, as some of the women described how they had been forced by their parents to keep the baby and get married against their will to avoid disgrace. There were also a few older participants who waited to have children. They had postponed parenthood until they had finalized their other life goals (education, career, travel) or found the right partner. These persons were quite exceptional in their age group, but would blend in easily with today's 25-40-year olds.

Still, the majority of participants aged 50 years or older were concerned with how many choices young people had, and decisions they needed to make, nowadays. They agreed that all these choices and planning made it difficult for young people to settle down. Olle (72), a father and grandfather, talked about how the script of a normative life course has changed:

Olle (72): There used to be a norm; this is what a life should look like. You should find a partner and then you should wait until you have somewhere to live, and then you can move in together and then you can get married. Then you work and have children. It was the template somehow. And that template does not really exist anymore, but now everyone should think for themselves and wish for what they want, and then it becomes much more 'Yes, but I want to travel first and do a lot of things before I settle down. Now I've gone to school and it has been boring and hard for so long so now I want to do something else, realize myself'. And then to catch up, you have to wait until you are 30.

Bo (71): But don't you think that today the responsibility lies with the woman; she is not prepared? Before, it was not a question of whether she was ready, then it was just making babies.

Bo (71), who had two daughters, argued that changed gender roles have led to greater opportunities for women to decide about reproduction, but it has also increased the requirement that women must feel prepared for parenthood. On the same theme, Hannah (32), who recently had her second child, stated that today it is expected that both parents should be ready, practically and mentally. This means that it may take longer than previously to reach the point of readiness.

### Parenthood becoming a project

Older participants expressed concern that having children today has become too much of a project. Britta (66) believed that today's family planning has become 'an entire company', and felt unease when thinking about how her children wanted everything to be ready before having children. Most of her peers agreed that the planning has gone too far, at least among the highly educated. Jack (55), who became a father in the late 1990s, talked about a different mentality back then in people's attitudes to life:

Jack (55): We were very bohemian, and took one day at a time. That said, the pace was very different then. The requirements were different.

Ingrid (78), a mother and grandmother, also noted a difference, and said that it was more evident in the earlier days 'to do everything at the same time', and that having children was not such a big deal. To younger mothers, it felt remote to think and act in this way as it was no longer regarded as good motherhood. A good mother was described as someone who was mature, calm, healthy, child-focused and self-sacrificing. Several young women longed for children, but felt that the pressure to become a good mother was so high that they did not think they would fit:

Elina (25): [The child wish] varies a lot, back and forth, and I have in different periods of life felt very differently, and I really think it is connected to me, to how I feel mentally, how stable I am. It is probably the largest [influencing factor] /... / The insecurity when you feel bad yourself also makes you get these thoughts, that I will be a bad mother. This thinking has also been there a lot when I have been low.

Tuva (25): There is so much you have to do and fulfil to be a good mother, there is a lot of pressure on how it should be, for the child to be well. Because you don't want to expose them to unnecessary trauma, to troubles /.../

The young women in this group agreed that feeling self-secure and having good mental health were requirements for parenthood. Also, a woman in another group had postponed parenthood as long as she possibly could as she had been too afraid of becoming a bad mother like her own.

Most of the young participants had divorced parents, but it did not lead them to refrain from the idea of parenthood. Instead, they wanted to be better prepared. Both young men and women talked about the importance of finding the right partner and living together for several years before having children. In that way, they could determine if the relationship would be strong enough to handle the challenges of parenthood. At the same time, the awareness that relationships might end increased women's motivation to become financially independent:

Anna (23): Then I have realized with age that becoming a mother is so important to me that whether I do it with a partner or not, it is not very important. I feel more that stable finances and housing are more important. I feel that I of course would rather do it with a partner /... / [but] should I not find the right one to do that journey with, I feel that I could definitely imagine doing it by myself.

Jill (24): I think even if you have a partner when you have children, it is not a guarantee that you will live together and have a partner by your side all the time. So I still think it can be good to think that you can manage it yourself, or manage [heh], that it can turn out that way.

Several young women had also been taught by their mothers at an early age to never depend on a man. This cautiousness was hence transferred from one generation to another.

## Stretched out life stages

David, a 36-year-old man who had his first child a year ago, built on the explanation about why people mature later and postpone parenthood nowadays:

David (36): We live longer so every part of life gets longer. We are teenagers longer; we are middle-aged longer. We expect to live longer, we retire older. I just think of my grandmother and grandfather, when they were 65, then it was 'old man's cap' and it-was-better-before thinking already then, /.../while my parents are 70 and they are still out and travelling and realizing themselves in some way /... / We want to have time to do so many things because we expect to live longer.

According to David, each stage of life has been stretched out as life expectancy today is longer than previously, and this gives the impression that the reproductive years have also been prolonged. There are also many more opportunities in life, which makes people want to do as much as possible at each life stage. When they have done everything on the bucket list of a young adult, an individual is expected to reach a point where they feel fed up with this stage of life and ready to move on to the next stage, as discussed by a group of middle-class, childless 30-year-olds:

Lisa (32): But isn't it also like this, that you get tired of all this other stuff that is great fun when you are 20? And then when you turn 30 you start feeling that you need something else in your life?

Johan (32): I think there is a lot of truth in that.

Anna (33): Yes, that's my feeling, truly. Since 30, I feel that there is no other reasonably fun next step in life. That it's a bit like that, I'm done with stuff, I have no desire to travel on a long backpacking trip anymore, I've already tried a few different jobs, nothing feels new. Having children is the next thing that could feel exciting. Johan: And is it grounded in ourselves? Is it in us, or is it expected that we should travel when we are between 20 and 30, and then you should think it's boring?

Anna: It's clearly also that it's because your friends have started to have children that you feel that way.

Erik (31): And because you start to have a notion that around 30 it is reasonable to start having children. Then you are mature enough.

This group, like several other groups of young adults with higher education, talked about the 20s as the years when you should focus on yourself and your own development. Turning 30 marks a shift where you should be full of life experience and ready to focus on and care for someone else. Notably, this shift usually occurs several years earlier for those who started working straight after high school. Christian (23) had many friends with vocational training who had started to have children already, and he talked about his friends as 'settled', unlike him. He was also afraid that a child would hinder his personal development and ambitions. However, while currently lacking the urge to have children, he (and many others) expected a biological clock to start ticking when reaching 'a certain age', probably around 30.

But what happens when you come to an age where you should feel ready to have children but you don't? Lisa (32), who had been in a relationship for more than 10 years, believed that there is a strong idea about a plan of how life should be at different stages, but it does not always match with your feelings at the time you get there. The urge to have children does not come automatically just because you have finished your education or found a job. Her friend Johan (30) agreed, and admitted that when he got the insight that 'it can happen whenever it happens', he got less interested in having children. 'Yes', Lisa responded, 'a little bit like that. Let's postpone it'.

### (Im)possibilities to procreate

Thomas (48), who became a father at 37 years of age, had postponed parenthood quite unconsciously as he and his wife were busy doing other things. In their case, there was 'no one there to remind them', as most of their friends were child-free and their parents did not interfere. When they eventually realized that they wanted children, they could not conceive without help from MAR. Feeling ready to have children but not being able to was a recurring topic during interviews.

Different aspects of involuntary childlessness were presented. Some wanted children but were single; and others were, or had been, in relationships with persons with whom they could not easily have biological children (gay, transgender and infertile couples). Elsa (83), who had her first child at 34 years of age, explained:

Elsa (83): Yes it seems that I deliberately waited to have children but I did not at all. It was just that I did not find anyone to have children with. Otherwise, I might as well have had one when I was 23, but...

At her time, the only viable option had been to wait and hope for Mr. Right to come along. She had heard of women who became pregnant 'on their own', but it had not been common at that time, and it was not what she wanted for herself.

Nowadays, there are more opportunities for those who are involuntarily childless, especially for women. Three women, who were now in their 30s, explained that they had experienced a strong urge to have children at 28 years of age but had no partner at the time. One of them decided to have children on her own through donor insemination as she could financially afford solo-parenthood and she believed that she would be a better mother as a single woman. The other women had come to the conclusion that being in a loving relationship was an absolute precondition for parenthood. One of them had let go of the idea of family for a while, until she unexpectedly found love at 36 years of age and gave birth to their first child at 37 years of age. The third woman, who was now 33 years of age, still hoped to find a partner, and felt stressed that her little brother had had a child before her. These three stories exemplify how the definition of family has broadened over the past decades, but also how the ideal of the normative life course and the nuclear family still persists.

### Intergenerational pronatalism

The interviews displayed high expectations of continuity of the family line. Parents usually said that they tried not to interfere with their children's reproductive choices, referring to how their own parents, or parents-in-law, had been too involved in their decisions. Still, many young adults felt more or less subtle pressure to give their parents grandchildren. When a child wanted to remain child-free, this could be difficult for a parent to understand, and the urge to interfere could become too strong. Elisabeth (63) explains:

Elisabeth (63): I have a daughter who is 36 and she has married a man who is much older than her and we have talked a lot about this but she never wants to have children, and it is a great sorrow for me /... / And it is probably because I know [from being the only child] what it's like to be alone, but she does not. She has so many arguments to why she does not want to have children but I feel... I said 'Jessica, when we are not there anymore...' I think when we are gone and her husband is so much older, she will be very lonely /... / Of course, I understand her, I do not nag at her and so on, but I still think that 'Think about it, it's not too late yet'.

Most of the child-free women described similar discussions that they had had with their mothers, where they had been urged to 'rethink' and they were hurt by the fact that their mothers did not support them. However, Sara (30) could see now that her mother's attitude had started to change:

Sara (30): You notice in her that she longs for grandchildren like crazy, but she has become much better at understanding that it is my and my brother's own choice, if we want [to have children].

Only one child-free woman said that her mother had been totally accepting of her choice. The two child-free men, who were both in relationships with other men, had not discussed family planning with their parents, and they did not feel the same pressure to have children.

### Discussion

This study addressed preconditions to parenthood from the perspectives of people who have passed reproductive age, people who are in the middle of the family-building process, and people who still have reproductive decisions ahead of them. We found increasing complexity around reproductive decision-making over time, especially among the highly educated. While love, financial stability and housing was usually enough according to those who had children in the 1960–1980s, those who had or will have children in later decades want to be better prepared – intellectually and materially – before having children. While procreation was described more as a 'natural' event in earlier days, it has become more and more a planned and demanding project, which, in combination with a longer period of education and a precarious labour market, seems to lead to postponement – and sometimes relinquishment – of child-

birth. However, continuity and change take place in parallel, and finding love and building a family remain highly valued life events.

### Increased demands on planning and readiness

To plan parenthood has become a norm, which is also clear from Swedish studies showing that more than three-quarters of pregnancies registered for antenatal care were defined as planned and intended (Bodin et al., 2015; Stern et al., 2016). Considering the enormous attention that has been given to planned parenthood around the globe in past decades, this is not a surprising result. According to sociologist Elisabeth Beck-Gernsheim (2002), the planning ideal also goes hand in hand with increased individualization. She argues that individualization has constructed the ideal of planning as a way for people to cope with the insecurities and uncertainties of life, which were formerly controlled by stronger family ties and norms. Related to her theories, Alvarez (2018) found that Spanish couples who discuss 'whether' to have children are more individualized than couples who discuss 'when' to have them. In our study, only a fraction of the older participants had asked themselves whether or not they wanted children before they became parents – it was usually self-evident to them – and only about half had actively thought about when they wanted to have children. Young adults, on the other hand, more often regarded parenthood as questionable, and had concerns around the timing of parenthood. They also seemed to experience a conflict between wanting parenthood to be a joint decision and merging this with an individualized lifestyle, which was not described as an issue by elder participants.

The planning ideal also follows some gender and class structures. Parallel to making educational and career plans, young women and trans-men clearly reflected upon their reproductive possibilities, painted different childbearing scenarios in their heads, and weighed pros and cons. Some of the young women in vocational training even started to save money for their family when still in school. Cis-men, on the other hand, seldom talked about child plans or demands of good parenting, although some mentioned current economic stability or relational concerns as barriers to parenthood.

Overall, young and child-free participants regarded economic stability as an important precondition to parenthood more often than older people and parents, and they generally had more things on their list of preconditions. Although people from all age groups wanted to build solid foundations before having children, our study shows that this has become increasingly important to feel mature and ready. Being mature was described as having 'done other things first' and gained life experience (see also Bergnéhr, 2008; Hviid Malling et al., 2020), being psychologically stable, and feeling that it is time to move on to the next stage of life. All these factors fit well into Giddens's (1991) description of the modern self-reflexive individual; a person who views the life course as made up by separate passages and who links progression to self-reflection. It could be that older people, in retrospect, view some preconditions as less important than they did when they were young. Still, the

discussions clearly point to the fact that young people today are more insecure about whether they will be able to meet the needs of children as they expect parenthood to involve higher demands.

Insecurity around parenthood is multidimensional. Hellstrand et al. (2020) have suggested that decreasing fertility rates could be related to increasing labour market insecurity, and unemployment in Sweden has increased from 2% in the 1970s to 7% in the 2010s (Statistics Sweden, 2020). However, it is not only the issue of providing financial security that is described in our study; insecurity is also related to changing parental ideals. While former days were described as more relaxed and a time when parents, or at least mothers, could 'bring their children with them everywhere' and 'do everything at the same time', young adults today often plan to become involved and child-centred parents. They expect that parenthood means giving up their former lifestyle (Bergnéhr, 2008), and that parenthood is a full-time and demanding commitment (Lebano and Jamieson, 2020; Wissö, 2019). However, all our participants expected that they would be gainfully employed after having a child/children; hence, it would be the time off work that would be child-centred.

Young adults prepared to manage their family on their own, without much help from their relatives. The mother-in-law, for example, who was described as an important character in the narratives of older participants, was rarely mentioned by middle-aged or younger participants. Our study thus supports previous findings that new parents turn to their own parents and friends for advice to a lesser extent, and instead actively search for information and support online (Plantin and Daneback, 2009) and from experts (Henriksson, 2016; Johansson and Vikström, 2009). We also see that it is increasingly important for parents-to-be to feel mentally prepared, independent and self-secure. At the same time, the increasing number of options and choices can make the future seem looser at the edges. As noted by Lebano and Jamieson (2020: 125), a wider availability of options makes the future more difficult to envision. As such, the many perceived preconditions to parenthood contribute to postponement of parenthood as it takes time to fulfil the requirements.

### Love and family

The results also show that expectations on love and relationships have changed. Many of the older participants settled down and had children early, usually with their first boy- or girlfriend. Several of them later separated when the children grew up. Younger participants did not expect to settle down with their first love; instead, they talked about trying out different relationships, hoping to find someone better the next time. Today, approximately half of all marriages in Sweden end in divorce (Statistics Sweden, 2020). Understandably, young people put a lot of time into finding the right partner; someone who they think they can cope with during the toddler years, also in case of separation. If the right partner is not to be found, becoming a solo mother is now a possible alternative for young women. This was not an option for older women who instead described childbirth outside of marriage as shameful.



Sociologist Eva Illouz connects this changed view of relationships to a change in culture. She argues that the moral stories that used to guide our behaviours have been replaced with ideals of autonomy and freedom, which create vague rules of interaction with unpredictable outcomes in private life (Illouz, 2019). In our study, we also noticed an ambiguity in the young women's reasonings around relationships, as they expressed a strong longing for family life while placing high value on their independence.

Although younger generations turn to their parents for advice to a lesser extent, the parents still play a certain role in reproductive decision-making as they often encourage reproduction as well as economic independence. Parents often said that they were reluctant to get involved with their children's reproductive decisions; however, most young participants were very aware of their parents longing for grandchildren (see also Bartholomaeus and Riggs, 2017). They had also been given advice by their parents concerning the timing of parenthood. Furthermore, participants who wished to remain child-free described a lack of emotional support from their parents, which strengthens the perception that a life without procreation deviates from the normative life course. Julia Moore (2018), who has studied child freedom in the USA, describes how some family members disregard the authenticity of the participants' desire to remain child-free by insisting that they will change their minds. This only happened to female participants in our study, which shows how strongly parenthood is associated with womanhood. The problem with this type of response from family members, Moore argues, is that it makes it difficult for child-free individuals to associate a positive social value with their reproductive decision. As such, having children remains the most normal and sound option.

All in all, to reproduce is still expected, encouraged and regarded as a meaning of life. Hence, our findings show that while people are increasingly guided by individualistic ideals, they are also influenced by traditional (and local) values around family and gender.

### Methodological discussion

The study sample was over-represented by white, middle-class, secularized women, which means that their perspectives dominated the data set. This study completely lacks the perspectives of how religion and disability affect reproductive choices and decisions. Although both genders were invited to participate in the study, men were more difficult to recruit. This could be related to, for example, the gendered connotations of the topic (see also Bodin et al., 2018; Grace et al., 2019), as well as the gender and age of the principal investigator.

Another possible limitation of our study is that older participants reflect upon their decisions in retrospect, which means that they may have forgotten parts of how they reasoned in their youth. Still, a strength of this study is its uniqueness in including people from many different generations and the representation of various reproductive experiences. Also, the cross-disciplinary research group contributed with multiple perspectives on reproductive decision-making, which strengthens the reliability of the study.

### Conclusions

Our findings reflect how reproductive decision-making has been affected by social changes over the past decades, but also how many norms around procreation still persist. While reproductive decision-making was previously presented more as a family affair, it has (at least rhetorically) gradually become a more individual decision and responsibility, with increasing demands on individual preparedness. Relatedly, people now want to feel that they have finished one life stage before moving on to the next. Furthermore, while MAR was sparsely available to older generations, it is something that people count on as a back-up today, or even as a first choice in some cases. However, despite the increasing requirements and ideals of planning and self-reflection, reproductive decision-making is not always a highly conscious process, but often a process that is influenced by norms and tradition.

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