Social influence and the timing of parenthood

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Abstract

There is a general trend of postponing entry into parenthood in Europe, Scandinavia being no exception. Previous research has suggested a range of reasons for this pattern to emerge, but comparatively little attention has been given the possible impact of the social network on the decision to try for a child. This paper explicates ways in which young Swedish adults in focus group discussions reason about the impact of friends and family in their reproductive decision-making. The analysis is based on a discourse analytical approach and inspired by social influence theory. The result of the focus group data indicates that the desire to maintain belonging and rootedness to friends as well as to kin is influential in procreative decision-making. Friends and family are recurrently referred to in the participants' reasoning about when parenthood is preferably entered.

Key words: postponed parenthood; timing parenthood; social influence; social network; focus group data, Sweden

The work of which the present study is part began in 2002, at a time when Swedish politicians and researchers for some years had shown increasing concerns about what were regarded as low birth rates. In the beginning of the 1990s, Sweden had been famous for comparatively high birth rates in the Western world, but then fertility dropped rapidly. Declining fertility and increasing mean age for first-time parents were common characteristics in the Western world at this time (Bongaarts, 2002); in Sweden, politicians and researchers pondered why the birth rates did not increase concurrently with the up-going economic trend. At the turn of the latest century, Swedish fertility slowly begun to increase again, and the upward trend continued (Statistics Sweden, 2007a), but there are indications that this is due to the general postponement of parenthood in the 1990s (Andersson, 2004; Bongaarts, 2002). That is, men and

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women deferred the transition and started to enter parenthood at an older age, as also occurred in other Western countries (Bongaarts, 2002). Recent official statistics show that the average age for Swedish first time mothers in 2004 was 29 and for fathers around 31 (Statistics Sweden, 2007b). The equivalent number for first time mothers in the European Union, in 2003, was 28 (EUROSTAT, 2008). Why, then, do European men and women enter parenthood at an older age today compared to what they did twenty and thirty years ago? Why is this trend as evident in Scandinavia as in other European countries, the Scandinavian welfare systems being famous for enabling the combination of paid work and parenthood and for being relatively good at providing employment opportunities and housing facilities for young people (Therborn, 2004)? The present work is part of a larger project in which these questions were asked.[2]

Previous research

Previous research has suggested a range of reasons for the general postponement of parenthood and decreasing fertility rates. In an influential paper, Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) pointed out five aspects of political and economic, as well as social, change that, according to them, are particularly significant to take into account. These aspects are: increased female labour force participation; the revolution of contraceptive methods; increased relationship instability; employment insecurity; and reduced welfare states. Since the 1970s, women have entered the paid labour market and higher education in great numbers; contraceptives are widespread and accessible in most countries; divorce and separation rates are high; the labour market is fluctuating and uncertain and particularly hard for young people to access; and the demands on higher education have lead to prolonged years of education. Increasing insecurities and demands have occurred parallel with cut-downs in welfare systems, and this has caused yet greater risks and costs with regard to entering parenthood. Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995), as well as others (see e.g. Brannen, Lewis, Nilsen & Smithson, 2002; Hoem & Hoem, 1987), suggested that these societal tendencies have resulted in low birth rates and a general deferment of parenthood.

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[2] The project title is 'Family and working life in the 21st century', and Eva Bernhardt, Stockholm University, is the principal investigator.

Other studies suggest that changed ideals on childrearing, having lead to parenthood being more demanding and energy consuming, are part in explaining decreasing fertility and deferred parenthood (Alwin, 1996; Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten, 1997). Yet other issues that are raised are changes in values and ideals around life course and life style arrangements (Bernhardt & Goldscheider, 2006; Lesthaeghe & Moors, 1996). There is also research suggesting autonomy and independence being important to young adults, and the postponement of entering parenthood being a result of this (Brannen et al., 2002; Michaels, 1988).

Previous research shows that reproductive decision-making is a complex matter, influenced by a range of social, political, economic and cultural factors. However, within the demographic research field, comparatively little attention has been given the possible impact of friends and kin on the timing of parenthood, although recently, this subject matter has been increasingly recognised (Bühler, 2008). One of the purposes with the present paper is to scrutinise the importance of the social network on reproductive decision-making. What, then, has been done so far with regard to this matter? Recent work by Bernardi (2003) indicates that norms, values and practices of the social network appear to affect procreative decisions, in line with the results of other studies (e.g. Basu & Aaby, 1998; Bernardi, von der Lippe & Leim, 2005; Greenhalgh, 1995; Kertzer & Fricke, 1997; Palkovitz & Sussman, 1988). Bernardi's study (2003) does not only indicate the importance of friends on procreative decisions but the impact of close family. The study suggests that parents may have a rather great impact on their children's reproductive decision-making due to emotional bonds and the help and support they may be able to offer.

Morgan and Berkowitz King (2001) suggested that the decision to enter parenthood is influenced by having experienced the benefits of parenthood vicariously, through siblings and/or friends, and that negative vicarious experiences may cause people to postpone the transition. In Fawcett's (1988) enumeration of costs and benefits of parenthood several social benefits appear, such as parenthood as a marker of adult status; the child reproduces the family and connects the generations; the child brings joy in life and new experiences to the parents; the child is a permanent person to love; and, the accomplishments of the child may reflect positively on the parents. A child could also be valued for being looked upon as a social resource when the parents

grow older - someone to rely on for help and support (Bühler, 2008; Michaels, 1988; Morgan & Berkowitz King, 2001). But, as has been indicated previously, parenthood is also connected to certain social restraints, such as less time for oneself, work, partner and friends (Bergnéhr, 2006; Brannen et al., 2002; Fawcett, 1988; Michaels, 1988).

Within psychology, there has been a long tradition of studying motivational factors for the timing of parenthood (Michaels, 1988). Within this research field, the transition to parenthood in relation to social support has been a recurrent topic of exploration. However, the focus in these studies is often on the detection of variables affecting mother/father/parents, child, family health and parental practices, rather than on aspects influencing the actual decision to try for a child (see e.g. Bost, Cox & Payne, 2002; Collins, Dunkel-Schetter, Lobel & Scrimshaw, 1993; Gage & Kirk, 2002; Michaels & Goldberg, 1988; Wandersman, Wandersman & Kahn, 1980). These studies do, however, point to the importance of acknowledging different impacts friends and family may have on individual decision-making and health. As Roelke (1993) stated, with regard to friendship and parental development: "Friends may be more important than ever in supporting the individual through times of major developmental change, and yet the changes themselves can alter the course and nature of these friendships" (p. 131). Roelke's argument is supported by sociologists who stress the importance of acknowledging the impact friends have on people's lives (Allan, 1989; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004).

Theoretical perspectives

The way of approaching fertility that has influenced the present analysis is the one presented within what some call anthropological demography (Basu and Aaby, 1998; Kertzer and Fricke, 1997). Anthropologists studying reproductive decision-making do so from a social constructionist approach and use mainly qualitative methods. Rather than assuming that there are general, universal factors that determine fertility in a certain way, they aim at situating fertility. Fertility is looked upon as socially and politically constructed and these constructions are dynamic and subject to change. In this tradition, reproductive decision-making is looked upon as a social phenomenon (Greenhalgh, 1995).

The term social influence has been used in demographic work to highlight social relations and networks as having an impact on individual action (Bernardi, 2003; Bongaarts and Watkins, 1996; Montgomery and Casterline, 1996). Bernardi (2003) defined social influence as following: "the process by which attitudes, values or behavior of an individual are determined by the attitudes, values or behavior of others with whom he or she interacts" (p. 535). She also stated that values and practices of friends tend to be of greater importance than those of family, as they "are assumed to face similar contingencies, as compared to previous generations", and because the "degree of similarity among close friends is generally higher, since the relationships are selected and not given, as those with kin" (Bernardi, 2003, p. 536). In addition to Bernardi, Åkesson (2001) has argued that kinship is "above all a cultural category" (p. 130); it is a nearness to other people that is politically and socially defined. In the present study, we look at how the categories of kinship and friendship are defined and related to notions of entry to parenthood.

Research questions

Do Swedish young adults refer to friends and family as being important in their reproductive decision-making? How are friendship and kin relations talked about in the focus group discussions on the deferral and timing of parenthood? These are the questions directing the present study. The study is part of a larger project, which consists of a quantitative and qualitative part and in which the scrutiny of values and attitudes of young Swedish adults in relation to parenthood and the timing of parenthood has been the objective (Bernhardt & Goldscheider, 2006). In the present paper, findings from the qualitative part are presented and discussed.

Method

Participants

The discussion in this work emanates from nine focus group interviews conducted in different parts of Sweden in 2002 and 2003. A total of 35 individuals between 24 and 39 years of age (M=28.66) participated in the focus groups, 12 men and 23 women. The number of

participants in each group varied from two to seven. Twelve of the participants in the data were first-time parents with a child between three weeks and twenty months old. Three individuals were expecting their first child at the time of the interview. The remaining twenty were not parents. Four couples participated; 24 participants had cohabiting partners or spouses and seven were seeing someone but not cohabiting; four were singles. Information about the length of the relationships is lacking from seven of the participants with partners. The length of the relationships, with regard to the others, varied from a few months to 23 years; 16 had been together with their current partner for 4.5 years or more at the time of the interview.

14 of the participants lived in what, in Sweden, would be termed large cities; three in a middle sized town and 18 in a small town or in the countryside. The educational level varied as follows: twelve were studying at college/university level, the majority within social work and health; eleven had college/university degrees, primarily within education and the health care sector, and twelve had high school degrees. Two participants were unemployed, 21 worked, and twelve were full-time students (some of which were working part time). The participants occupied jobs such as nurse, primary school teacher, taxi-driver, truck-driver, social worker, janitor, assistant, road mender, fitter, prison guard, and civil servant; the students were aiming for degrees in sociology and political science, health, medicine, social work, history and at police school. All participants were ethnic Swedes (Caucasian) with no recent immigrant background except one participant who was adopted from Asia by Swedish parents.

The purpose of recruiting people with different backgrounds was to get a broad data set in regard to the participants' social, occupational and educational backgrounds and to reach people with varying experiences. Clearly, the data could have varied more still, particularly with regard to the ethnic composition. An additional purpose was to recruit participants who were 25 years of age or older. This age restriction was based on official statistics indicating that men and women in Sweden generally do not plan on entering parenthood much younger than 25. Another criterion was that those participating had no children, alternatively were pregnant with/planning or recently had their first child. The inclusion of first time parents as well as non-parents made it

possible to ask slightly different questions to those who had not yet entered parenthood and to those who actually had.

The participants were recruited in different ways: most were recruited through friends/acquaintance and snowball sampling. Friends to the moderator provided lists of their acquaintances and these were contacted and asked whether they know of others who may like to participate, and so on (N=19). (No friends or acquaintances of the moderator participated in the groups.) Some participants were contacted through their work (N=3); some through the place where they were studying (university/college) (N=9); and some through the place where they went for check-ups and parental classes after giving birth (N=4). The easiest way by far was to recruit participants through personal contacts, as the above numbers indicate. The participants were offered movie tickets as remuneration, in addition to coffee and snacks at the interview.

Procedures

The focus group interviews where conducted at different places: at educational settings, work places, health care centres for children and parents, and in private homes. The moderator brought drinks and snacks that were consumed during the interview. All focus group interviews conducted for the present study went smoothly and in a free flowing manner. The participants seemed at ease with one another and the moderator. Personal experiences and details are usually shared when the participants are interested in the topic of discussion, and the moderator has to be aware that group discussions may stimulate such self-disclosure and that some participants may regret being so open (Morgan, 1998). The participants in the focus group data were open about personal experiences and feelings, but the moderator did inform them of the risk of self-disclosure at the beginning of each interview, and asked them to consider what they wished to share and not to share with the group.

The interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours and were conducted in a less structured way. Less structured groups are centred on fewer questions than structured groups, and the moderator's role is to facilitate discussions around broad topics (Morgan, 1998). All interviews were tape-recorded, with the participants' consent. The participants were guaranteed anonymity

and their names changed to pseudonyms. The quotes from the interviews have been translated from the Swedish.

The focus group discussions were based on the following guiding questions: Why do you think the mean age for first-time parents has increased when comparing the 1970s, with a mean age of approximately 23 to 25 years, and the early 21st century with an average age of approximately 29 for women and 31 for men? Is a child something you anticipate having at some stage in life? Why? Why not? Was having a child something you anticipated long before you decided to try for one? Why did you decide to try for a child when you did? How do/did you imagine life as a parent compared to life without a child? What do you know about the parental leave system and family allowances? Will you/did you calculate the cost of having a child before trying for one? What do/did you think about you/your partner being pregnant? What do/did you think about the delivery? As can be seen, there was no specific question about the possible impact of friends and kin on entry to parenthood. This reflects the ignorance prior to the focus groups of the possible influence of the social network on reproductive decision-making (see also Bergnéhr, 2006).

Analytical conduct

The present analysis has evolved after transcribing the focus group interviews, reading the transcripts repeatedly, concurrently with absorbing previous research on related topics, writing and presenting conference and seminar papers. Transcripts have been read, analysed and discussed within the project group and at methodological seminars with co-researchers.

The analytical process began with detecting prominent themes in the focus group interviews, when transcribing the discussions and through reading the transcripts repeatedly. New themes appeared, and the themes came across as more and more complex. Concurrently with detecting and analysing themes prevalent discourses appeared and came to direct the analysis further. When scrutinizing the discussions of a certain theme, it became evident that there are different, often contradictory discourses that direct and permeate them. The detection of themes and discourses was mostly centred on the focus group level, but when scrutinizing the discourses

further the positioning of specific individuals appeared, adding further complexity to the data and the analysis. The analytical approach of the present study has been to look at how the interviewees, through their positioning, illuminate and portray parenthood in relation to kin and friendship relations.

The analysis is inspired by discourse analysis, as it is outlined by, for instance, Potter and Wetherell (1987) and Weedon (1987). In this work, language is regarded as being of prime interest to study because it is within and through language that knowledge – that is, values, attitudes, norms, and the sense of self – is understood, produced, negotiated and reconstructed. Studying the production of knowledge enables us to improve our understandings of people's (situated) actions, agency and power relations. The term discourse is central in these writings. Discourses can be referred to as meaning-making systems that include thinking, talking and acting, and that exist in written documents, oral forms, and in the activities of everyday life. Discourses are embodied notions that are expressed and articulated in speech and action (Weedon, 1987). Subjects are constructed in relation to "discourses presently in circulation" (Freeman, 1993, p. 198).

In addition to this, the concept of subject positioning (Davies & Harré, 1990) illuminates subjects as active agents in their everyday lives and in the construction of self. People actively position themselves in relation to different discourses, which they, through their positioning, affirm and reject, embrace and oppose, and redefine in relation to other subjects. In the present paper, the analysis illuminates the discourses on kin and friendship, and how the focus group participants use these in their discussions on the timing of parenthood. The citations were chosen for the purpose of illuminating common ways of reasoning and positioning.

Results

In the data overall, the focus group participants recurrently refer to friends and family as examples of how not to live life and when and when not to enter parenthood. They appear to compare themselves and the life they want to live with those already having entered parenthood

and refer to vicarious experiences as being influential in their reproductive decision-making. However, there are many discourses drawn upon when each participant explains his or her reasons for entering or postponing parenthood – discourses on risk, on good parenthood, on the good intimate relationship, and on the ideal life course, to mention a few, beside the discourses on friendship and kin. Thus, there is not one but many answers given to the question why parenthood is postponed and yet entered.

Parenthood and change

When the participants talk about parenthood – how they imagine and imagined parenthood – they recurrently refer to a range of tribulations and the fear of being tied down. The uncertainties and hardship parenthood is portrayed to entail are talked about as reasons for deferring the transition, and the social network is referred to as being the main source of information of what parenthood could entail. One example of this common positioning is Jill's. Jill is a 28 years old university student who is cohabiting with her boyfriend of seven years. She justifies her deferral of parenthood in the following way:

Jill: I think what's been influencing me a little, at least the last years, is that the ones you talk to who have children, my friends and my sister and such, that those girls, or mums, say that they don't have time for anything. 'Yes, I didn't have time for that, I don't have time to go to the gym, yes we can't go out, we can't walk around town in peace and quite' (focus group 6, non-parent).

Jill's positioning signifies the data overall in that she draws upon different answers when trying to understand the behaviour of her own and others. However, she, as other participants, is also consistent on recurrently turning to one or some explanations, which she appears to find the most suitable for her situation. The above citation exemplifies a common positioning of Jill, as well as of others – that of referring to vicarious experiences of friends and family, and the hardship parenthood may entail. In other parts of the interview, Jill rejects the idea that extrinsic circumstances such as income, a permanent position and better housing would affect her reproductive decision-making. She, on the other hand, talks about the decision being contingent

on the intrinsic feeling of maturity – of being ready to sacrifice one's own time and independence and to live a quite different life.

There is not one individual in the data that rejects the positioning of Jill – the affirmation of the childless life as bringing freedom and independence and parenthood as a life diverging from this are recurrent and dominant ways of picturing parenthood and life without children. Another example is Harry, a 31 years old first-time-parent with a high school degree, residing and working in a small town (focus group 2). He emphasises his negative vicarious experiences of friends and the life style change that parenthood entailed on their lives, when he justifies his deferral of parenthood.

Harry: I've got some mates who had children early and I've seen how they've changed, to me in a negative way, and became very odd and inhibited, in some way. They almost, today, point to this themselves, and say 'oops, that was probably a bit too early'. I guess I had that, that I saw their, I shouldn't say mistake but (...) They had children at a time when I thought I was way too immature, and with hindsight they may feel they had children too early (focus group 2, first-time-parent).

A common way in the data is to portray friends and acquaintances that had children in their early 20s as being restricted, inhibited and lacking ambition; the underlying norm supposedly being that a normal Swedish young adult should desire a rather long period of adult life independent of parental obligations.

There is a recurrent dilemma brought up by the participants, saturating the positioning – the dilemma of not knowing how parenthood actually will turn out. Regardless of the amount of vicarious experiences an individual may have, he or she cannot know the consequences, the costs and benefits, that parenthood would result in for him or her. Amanda, a 31 years old city dweller, cohabiting with her boyfriend of 4.5 years and working within social work, illustrates the dilemma when she says:

Amanda: You look at these parents, how damn tired they are, but I see some of my friends' children and it's like really difficult to imagine how it would be, I think. You have to throw

yourself in, when you finally do it, and see to it that you come out on the other side somehow. But that's what they all say, 'it's a new life' (focus group 3, non-parent).

Parenthood is a new life, in many respects harder compared to the life of the childless. But it is also a life impossible to know the outcome of. That is the content of the focus group reasoning; vicarious experiences are influential but they give no guarantees.

Entering parenthood together

There are indications that focus group participants fear the implications parenthood could have for friendship relations and/or that a sense of security is gained from the notion that one is sustaining or entering the same life phase one's friends are in. That is, the reciprocity and sharing of experiences, ideals and ideas may decrease between friends if one enters parenthood and the other does not, but it may maintain and strengthen if parenthood is entered together. The timing of parenthood is described to be contagious in the data. Cleo, a student, and Jasmine, working as an assistant, are both 28 years old and cohabiting with their long time boyfriends (of six and ten years) in a small town. They argue as follows:

Cleo: Well, I look a lot at what others do and if all my friends were to have children I would probably want children too. (...) I know I would love having a child but then I want my friends to have one as well.

Jasmine: So you don't miss out on anything (focus group 1, non-parents).

Cleo and Jasmine emphasize the importance of friends in their lives, as is done overall in the data. The above quote relates to a discussion on the satisfactory life the women regard themselves to have without children, spending lots of time socializing with other childless friends. Jasmine's account indicates the fear of as a parent missing out on activities that to them epitomize life without children, such as visiting restaurants and clubs. A new phase and kind of life is accomplished together when parenthood is entered with friends. However, there is also the notion of missing out on things involved in parenthood. Some participants refer to themselves as feeling left out when being childless, most of their friends having entered parenthood before them;

Vendela, 39, first-time-parent, and Jennifer, 36, first-time-parent (focus group 4), are two examples.

Jennifer: I felt that I wasn't worth as much as those who had children. Like,'hey, you're not in the same league as us, you don't have children'. (...)

Vendela: Like, as you don't know anything about life up until you have a child, although you've done plenty, worked, travelled, and all sorts.

Jennifer: It's not valued in the same way (focus group 4, first-time-parents).

Noah, a 26 year old, unemployed, parent-to-be, brought up the following response from his friends with regard to him becoming a father: "They get damn stressed when I tell them I'm going to have a child. They start to ponder and think like 'you're starting to get old', 'you're starting to get to that age', sort of'" (focus group 9).

The result of the data indicates that friendship in the contemporary Swedish society is strongly connected to similar life stages and life styles, and that parenthood and being childless are looked upon as being somewhat diverging ways of living. Sabina, 29 years old and a non-parent, working and cohabiting with her boyfriend of 5.5 years (focus group 9), explicitly uses the word security when she explains why friends have such an impact on the timing of parenthood. She argues that worries and insecurities are ventilated through a more balanced picture and that an increased feeling of security results when the transition to parenthood is reflected upon with friends. The reasoning by other participants confirms this picture.

The influence of kin and social stability

The discourse on kinship, that is, the ways in which the focus group participants talk about and position themselves towards kin and family, suggests that ties to family and relatives are regarded as highly important. One of the most emphasized reasons for entering parenthood, besides parenthood working as a sign of normalcy, is the picture of parenthood as an insurance against loneliness and dull life during older age. The common line of argumentation is that the child provides the parents with somebody to live through and company when the parents grow older; parents are sure of having somebody who comes for visits and somebody to socialize with,

and a child has the potential to provide the parents with grandchildren, who in their part enlarge the family and enrich life. To chose never to have children are referred to as abnormal and somewhat strange; for instance Glen, a 24 years old student with a girlfriend, living in a larger city (focus group 7), talks about feeling sorry for older people without children, an approach to childlessness which mirrors the overall positioning in the data.

Glen: I feel I react a bit in that case like God, it's a bit tragic, they never had children. And it can't be fun when you get older, like. (....) It's just, yes tragic for people who don't have a child, for those individuals (focus group 7, non-parent).

The content of the argumentation is that life, in particular at older age, would be dull without children. Thus, regardless of the strong emphasis on friendship ties that are found in the data, kin appears to be what counts – kin provides social security – at older age, with regard to how the focus group participants draw upon the discourse on kin.

A mentioned social benefit of parenthood is that a child creates and stabilizes eternal kinship ties between people, such as to oneself and ones partner but also as for instance between sisters-in-law. In this way a child ensures the consistency of certain social relations, even if the parents were to separate, which is an all too prominent risk evolving in the focus group discussions (Bergnéhr, 2006). We see, through this kind of reasoning, that the child appears to be regarded as the glue that binds people together in a world where relations are unstable and insecure. That is, kinship ties, at least some, appear to be regarded as stronger and more secure than friendship relations.

However, kin and family are not only referred to in positive terms. Parents and parents-in-law are talked about as people who try to have an impact on their offspring's reproductive decision-making, for instance by recurrently bringing up their desire for grandchildren, but also by encouraging their children to defer parenthood, to "do everything you want first", as Lisa, 31, childless with a boyfriend (focus group 6), explains matters.

Parents may influence the decision to try for a child only by being there as potential, future grandparents; the notion that parents and/or parents-in-law expect and desire grandchildren is enough to create a certain amount of social pressure, the focus group

participants reason. However, this pressure and desire of the potential, future, grandparents, also come across as being expected, causing disappointment in cases where no such anticipation is aired. That one's parents should desire grandchildren appear to be as taken for granted as the notion that all people should wish to enter parenthood, although later rather than sooner. Dan, 36 years old, married and a first time parent of a 20 months old child (focus group 8), brings up his disappointment over his parents' lacking interest in weather he was going to have a child and their (lack of) commitment to his child.

Dan: My parents never said anything, actually (about weather Dan and his wife were going to try for a child). I wish they had, I would have liked them to raise the issue at some stage, actually. It's like they lack interest (...) I guess I would have liked a bit more commitment from them (focus group 8, first-time-parent).

The future grandparents' age is reflected over when the timing of parenthood is discussed. Grandparents who are too old may not be able to help out and socialize with the grandchildren in the anticipated way, it is stated, this being one possible consequence of postponing parenthood. However, it is not brought up that grandparents younger than 65 most likely are involved in full-time, paid work, women as well as men – and that this could leave less room for spending time and energy on grandchildren. In addition, the present society, characterised by high numbers of national and international migration, have resulted in many families with young children living far away from close relatives and thus lacking this kind of support. The idea and ideal of the supportive, attentive grandparent may, thus, for many, be rather unrealistic.

Discussion

As has been mentioned previously, the present study is part of a larger research project consisting of a quantitative and qualitative component. Bernhardt's quantitative investigation includes an exploration of how values and attitudes towards family formation appear to be connected to actual reproductive behaviour (Bernhardt and Goldscheider, 2006). A summary of Bernhardt's findings indicates that the preconditions for entering parenthood that Hobcraft and

Kiernan (1995) enumerated are relevant for most Swedish young adults. That is, stable income, stable relationship, completed education and proper accommodation are variables that people generally consider to be important criteria. But Bernhardt's study also shows that accomplishment of these criteria does not necessarily result in a desire to enter parenthood. Brannen et al. (2002) suggested that the European deferral of parenthood is people's way of accomplishing all these other things in life that they wish to do before parenthood. The result of the present study supports Bernhardt and Goldschieder's (2006) as well as Brannen et al.'s (2002) investigations. There appear to be the norm in most social circles that many things should be accomplished before entering parenthood, such as travel, career, perhaps studies, hobbies, finding and spending time with the right partner, clubbing and partying, and socializing with friends (Bergnéhr, 2008).

The Swedish welfare state has generous family politics; it provides it citizens with paid parental leave, available and subsidised child care, a general child allowance, free health care for mothers and children, and sick leave insurance with paid days for staying home with sick children. Additionally, the unemployment insurance, housing allowances for students and those with low income, and comparatively generous students loans yield security. Regardless, Swedish men and women defer entry into parenthood. Could it be that Swedish society enables people to prioritise time and money on studies, work, hobbies, travel, and socializing in ways that make people reluctant to prioritise differently? Could it be that notions on good parenthood have come to diverge quite radically from notions on the childless life, engendering the perception that the life styles before and after entry to parenthood are hard to merge, as the studies by Alwin (1996) and Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten (1997) are inclined to indicate.

As the present study indicates, parenthood is commonly connected to a change of life and risks of certain kinds, of which one is the risk of loosing out on friendships; for many, the transition to parenthood is preferably entered around the same time as one's friends. Parenthood is connected also to positive aspects, such as producing a close kin, of connecting the generations, and of social security at older age, but also as something that may bring one closer to friends who have already entered parenthood. Several of these costs and benefits with parenthood have been

raised previously by, for instance, Fawcett (1988). The potential costs and benefits on friendship relations have, however, been less emphasised, in particular in relation to reproductive decision-making.

The focus group participants in the present study draw recurrently on vicarious experiences from their social network when explicating ideas and notions of what parenthood could entail, in this regard supporting theories on social influence (Bernardi, 2003; Bühler, 2008; Bongaarts & Watkins, 1996; Fawcett, 1988; Montgomery & Casterline, 1996; Morgan & Berkowits King, 2001). The present study does also support research illuminating the influence of friends on people's lives. As previous research suggests (Allan, 1988; Roelke, 1993; Roseneil & Budgeon, 2004), friends are important sources of information and support. The focus group participants position friends and the social network as being influential in the decision to try for a child, resembling, for instance, the findings of Bernardi (2003) and the reasoning of Montgomery and Casterline (1996) and Morgan and Berkowitz King (2001). In addition, the present study indicates, as Rose Fischer stressed, that "The birth of a child creates new role relationships for a whole set of family members who become grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc." (1988, p. 201), and this, in the focus group discussions, is brought up as something of great importance. The result of the positioning toward discourses on friendship and kinship illuminates connectedness and belonging to a group of friends and to kin as being essential, perhaps particularly in times of life course transitions, as Roelke (1993) suggested.

What happens with the social network when a child is born? How, as Roelke asked (1993), do life transitions like parenthood "alter the course and nature" (p. 131) of friendships, and how does social support work within social networks? These questions appear pertinent to explore further, although related work has been conducted (e. g. Bost, Cox & Payne, 2002; Collins, Dunkel-Schetter, Lobel & Scrimshaw, 1993; Gage & Kirk, 2002; Michaels & Goldberg, 1988; Wandersman, Wandersman & Kahn, 1980).

One of the questions that the result of this study engenders is: Why is parenthood so often related to change and restraint in the focus group discussions? Why is parenthood referred to as entering a new phase, which would lead to different ways of socializing and perhaps affecting

both friendships and kin relations? It has to be noted that, in Sweden, almost all mothers and fathers return to paid labour within 18 months after a child is born, so life is maintained to quite a great extent, comparatively speaking. However, possibly less so when it comes to the social network and social relations – but why? What separates parents and non-parents? Is the child in contemporary Sweden attracting some relations but pushing others away? If this is the case, which are the social mechanisms and institutions that tend to generate this phenomenon? These questions require further investigation.

Method

There is a difference between talk and conduct. Official statistics, for instance, inform us about how people generally behave, but not about why. The 'why' is for us to reason about using the means, the discourses, we have and position our selves in relation to, and this is what is done in the focus group interviews conducted for and presented in the present work; the participants try to explain and attach reason to the behaviour of others and themselves; they try to understand and present feasible explanations for the general postponement of parenthood, and in doing so they draw on experiences they have gained culturally, socially and individually. In this way, the reasoning in the focus group discussions becomes part of a wider cultural collective of similar experiences and lives.

The choice of data for this study was based on previous research promoting the focus group method for those interested in exploring the ways in which people reason around a given topic (see e.g. Brannen et al., 2002; Morgan, 1998). The method turned out to be very fruitful in providing rich data on notions of parenthood and the timing of parenthood. There was no question asked about the possible impact of friends and family in the participants' reproductive decision-making, originally in the interview guide, but this was a topic recurrently raised. This illuminates the benefits of the focus group method. That is, that new topics may arise in the discussions and that participants as well as the moderator/researchers are forced to reflect over their standpoints, to elaborate on and motivate their answers, and to discuss issues they previously had not though much about (Morgan, 1998).

The intention was to have as many men as women in the data, but in reality it was harder to recruit men. This may indicate that reproduction and parenthood continue to be associated first and foremost with women and womanhood. It could also be an effect of the fact that it was a woman who contacted people and conducted the groups – a man may have gotten more men to join, and perhaps, other answers. A broader sample with regard to sex, age and ethnicity could have resulted in a more varied collection of answers, that is, in a greater variety of discourses and subject positions. However, finding participants and arranging times and places suitable to most of those volunteering to participate were time-consuming tasks, as others using the focus group method have experienced (Morgan 1998; Wilkinson 2003).

It is important to consider the influence of parental experiences on what is said (and unsaid). The parents in the sample participated in groups with other parents only, but the children varied in age from three weeks to around 20 months. Although the discussion was not focused on experiences of parenthood, these (different) experiences could impact on the positioning of the parents. Likewise, participants expecting their first child may be affected by this status in their affirmation of and opposition to different discourses and positions. The positioning was, however, similar between parents and non-parents, as well as between the sexes.

Conclusion

Friends, acquaintances and kin are significant relationships and sources of support in people's everyday lives. The focus group data support this, and the results of the analysis suggest that friends and social networks do have an impact on reproductive decision-making. Friends and kin may give vicarious experiences of being a parent and potential grandparents may bring up their longing for grandchildren, which they to some extent are supposed to do. The timing of parenthood is recurrently discussed in relation to potential costs and benefits that parenthood could have on friendship and kin relations. Grandparents are referred to as being primary kin to the (future) child and as potential resources for support and help in minding the child. The child

is also said to provide social security at older age. Throughout the data, the social network and connectedness come across as being of greatest importance in people's lives.

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