

Fertility and personal networks: The meaning of children in friendships among men.¹

An-Magritt Jensen

Professor

Dept of Sociology and Political Science, Norwegian University of Science and
Technology (NTNU)

Paper to European Population Conference, Stockholm 2012

DRAFT

More Norwegians live without children and spend more time with friends well into their adulthood. Does this impact their fertility? The prolonged life phase without child responsibilities is a male, more than a female, phenomenon. In Norway, fertility rates have increased over the last decades. At the same time more men remain childless into their forties. Fertility is marked by a gender paradox. I shall discuss this in relation to the hypothesis of the 'Low fertility trap' by Lutz, Skirbekk and Testa (2006) whereby the social environment is assumed to suppress further down in countries with already low fertility. As more friends have fewer children one may expect a downward spiral reinforcing fewer children to be born. In the process a trap may unfold since: "The fewer the children belonging to the environment that the young people experience, the lower the number of children that will be part of their normative system in terms of what is a desirable life" (op.cit. 13).

The low fertility trap hypothesis points to the importance of the social environment in accelerating fertility decline. In principle one may consider also an opposite impact whereby the social environment can accelerate a fertility increase, if friends support each other in having children. This paper examines impacts from the social environment on fertility among men and women. I shall focus on the social environment of men and define this as the network of friends. In Nordic countries, unlike many countries in Southern Europe, young people move out of the parental home rather early and spend much time with friends in their independent life. I shall ask whether men have fewer children in their environment; and if children occupy a different space in men's normative system than among women?

Data

The primary data source for this paper is ninety qualitative interviews collected during spring 2010. The respondents are Norwegian women and men, with and without children, in the cities of Oslo and Trondheim. They are mainly born in 1975-1985.² Respondents were strategically selected among working class occupations, that is, lower service class or manual occupations requiring no formal education beyond upper secondary level (22 women and 22 men); and upper middle class occupations, that is, professional occupations requiring MA level education (24 women and 22 men). In this way, we aimed at exploring potential variation between gender and socio-economic groups. The interviews followed a semi-structured guide and included questions on household economy, partnership, social networks, and some general questions relevant to fertility choice. The qualitative interviews will be supplemented with quantitative data on fertility development.

Networks matter: what theories suggest

Network analysis gained attention during the 1990s, both as a method and a theoretical orientation (Mische 2011). The network idea is not new. As Bott declared half a century ago, 'any sort of group is related to its environment' (1957: 249). She distinguished between 'close-knit' and 'loose-knit' relationships. Granovetter (1973) takes this idea one step further by emphasising that network analysis provides a link between small-scale interaction and large-scale patterns. His attention was turned to the density of networks in claiming that 'weak ties' are sites where people pick up new ideas since they 'move in circles different from our own' (p. 1371) and thus are 'more likely to link people of different small groups' (p. 1375). Friendships capture many elements of 'weak ties' with people moving in and out of more or less extensive relationships.

In a later work (1978), Granovetter examined the importance of 'threshold levels' for new behaviour to develop and focused on the 'band wagon effect' as a main mechanism. Importantly, he maintained that threshold levels vary with individuals' preparedness to take risks. More recent network theorists lean on Granovetter in emphasising that individuals are not atomized actors (Raub and Weesie 1990), as well as on Valente (1996) in arguing for the impact of social influence, as most 'prefer to wait until other people have tried it first' (p. 69) – a rephrasing of Granovetter's bandwagon effect.

Network analyses of fertility are limited but are now attracting attention. Bernardi (2003) explores how social relationships, including family members, work-mates, neighbours and friends, are potential sources of social influence on couples' fertility decisions, as they are confronted with 'the attitudes, behaviour and comments in a world of others, kin and non-kin' (p. 528). In a similar vein, Bernardi and Oppo find that, through networks, people are exposed to diverse models of parenthood (2007: 197), while Rossier and Bernardi (2009) draw the macro-micro link by asking how individuals continue to share positive attitudes to family formation 'even in contexts where macro-social change has rendered having children more difficult' (p. 483). They suggest that new behaviour is formed through social learning as a mechanism to 'form realistic fertility intentions' (op. cit.). Keim, Klärner and Bernardi (2009) identified networks of friends as the 'blind spot' of fertility analysis.

I see childbearing as an example of 'small-scale interaction' shaping large-scale patterns of fertility. The concepts of *threshold levels* and *bandwagon effect* capture mechanisms through which people's childbearing may be impacted by their networks. Mische's pipelines of *social influence*, which can be direct as well as indirect, will be used to understand if a bandwagon effect can be identified. Rossier and Bernardi's concept of *social learning* is useful to examine observations on how friends' lives are changed, for better or worse, and the demands and gratifications of having children. A common *meaning structure* can appear if networks are adjusted to childbearing. Whether social influence or social learning has any bearing on a person's fertility behaviour may depend on that individual's *preparedness to take risks* or to obey normative systems.

I suggest that the role of children for men has shifted maybe even more than for women. Historically, *having* children was a status-enhancing position among upper-class men in particular, Gillis notes (2000). By contrast, the modern concept of 'involved fatherhood' signifies active care for children at home, while labour market claims on attendance and engagement have also been intensified. Both trends, but in varying degrees, are emblematic of rich societies and expectations may be felt stronger in upper middle class than in the working class. As a response to the double demands of home and the labour market among American fathers, Gerson (1993: 75) found that one strategy is 'to keep the family small'. Ideologies of gender equality are widely accepted (Plan A) but hard to fulfil (Gerson 2012).³ As an

alternative (Plan B) most fathers opt for a traditional breadwinner role. By contrast, women want autonomy. Fatherhood and work have different implications for men and women.

Does class matter? Bottero and Irwin (2003) note that, despite prevailing social differences, most people will not see their position in class terms: ‘Because our personal world is largely filled with people just like us, we tend to think of our social situation as normal and unexceptional, and we therefore see our hierarchical position as “average” or “middling”’ (op. cit. 471).⁴ Nevertheless, perceptions of children as well as childbearing behaviour can take different paths in networks of diverse classes.

Following the hypothesis of the low fertility trap (Lutz et al. 2006) I assume that children are not part of life in similar ways for men and for women. In particular (still?) childless young men may have low exposure to children in their social environment. Furthermore I assume that neither perceived risks nor the actual consequences of having children are independent of class positions.

Children in young people’s environments: what statistics tell.

Children are becoming fewer, but variations in exposure to children are noteworthy. Across European countries the proportions of women and men (age group 34-39) are distinct as: ‘Among women it is more common to live with children than to live with partners.... Among men, the opposite is true: it is more common to live with a partner than to live with children’ (Jensen 1998: 94). Men are in general less exposed to children than women.⁵ Turning to Norway this general pattern is reinforced. Over the last decades fertility rates have increased, and more men remain childless.

Over the last decades, fertility reached a low point in the mid-1980s, with a total fertility rate of 1.7, but by 2011 this had increased to 1.9.⁶ Parallel to the fertility increase childlessness is rising among men. At age 40 every fourth man do not have children, while childlessness has increased only marginally among women.

Figure 1 Proportion of childless women and men at age 40 by birth cohorts. Norway.

Gender differences are widening. While 40 per cent of the women born in 1981 do not have children at age 30, 60 per cent of the men do not. Compared to those born in 1940 an increase at 11 and 32,5 per cent points for women and men respectively has taken place. By the end of the twenties a majority of women have children, while a minority of men have. Statistics

inform us that women are increasingly more likely to have children as a normal part of life, than men are. We know that this is a result from the general postponement of the first child. We also know that many have children after age 30. But why should this postponement be stronger among young men than women?

Education plays an interesting role in this development. Traditionally, and across countries, women with low education have more children. In Norway highly educated women wait longer, similar to most European countries, but catch up as they get older (Lappegård and Rønsen 2005; for Nordic countries see Andersson et al. 2008: 14).⁷ Rising fertility rates among highly educated women is a new trend and particular to the Nordic countries. Moreover, childlessness remains low and shows a downward trend for the highly educated. Among men a reverse trend has taken place.

Figure 2: Childlessness by birth cohorts, educational level and gender at age 40. % Norway

Childlessness has always been higher among less educated men than for those with the highest education (Kravdal and Rindfuss, 2008; Rønsen and Skrede, 2010). But the growth is steeper among the most highly educated. Childlessness among men with the highest education is approaching the level of the lowest educated men.⁸ A two-folded ‘catch-up’ effect is unfolding, working in opposite directions among the highly educated men and women. Educated men ‘catch-up’ with the higher levels of childlessness among men with low education. By contrast, educated women ‘catch-up’ with the lower levels of childlessness among women with low education. Furthermore, the increasing childlessness among men, across educational groups, suggests that a polarization may be in process. On the one hand, a growing minority of men remain childless beyond their forties, and their fifties. Only time will show if these men ever have a child. On the other hand, a ‘recirculation’ of fathers with children with several partners, is evolving (Rønsen, Skrede and Lappegård, 2010). More men do not have children as ‘part of normal life’, and even among fathers more have children with whom they do not share everyday life.

As a result of this development fewer men are exposed to own children in their social environment and the trend is fortified among the highly educated. More women have a daily life with children as fertility goes up, and this trend is reinforced by instability of family patterns (an aspect which will not be covered here). It seems sensible to link the rising childlessness among men to changes in the social structure such as the rising demands for

involvement among men both at home and at work as discussed above. Men are likely to be caught in conflicting pressures both from within and outside the family. To escape a conflict, a 'job-first-child-next' strategy, can resolve the issue. However, as more men live without children for a long period they may get accustomed to this life (as suggested in the low-fertility-trap-hypothesis) and permanent childlessness may result even if this was not planned from the start. Both delaying and foregoing children may be easier choices for men than for women. First, men do not meet the same biological barriers to late childbearing as women do. Secondly, several studies suggest that men's desire for children is weaker (among others, see Lyngstad and Noack 2005 for Norway; Bernhardt 2000 for Sweden; Sobotka and Testa 2008 for many countries in Europe; and Bumpass et al. 2009 for Japan). Bottero and Irwin (2003) point out that childbearing has always been an integrated part of social structure, and that 'the shifting social positioning of children altered motives for having children' (op. cit., p. 477). Trends in childlessness suggest a shift in the social meaning of children, with opposite implications for both gender and class.

The child environment in the qualitative sample

Our sample is described above. As part of our data collection each respondent filled in a network map divided into three circles. Here respondents were asked to place the persons from the nearest to the most distant circle in accordance with their importance. They were also asked to indicate the number and ages of the children among people in their network. These persons could be family, friends, colleagues or others. The map was a starting point for conversations on children in their environments. Our sample included 44 men and 46 women. Fifty were parents and 40 were childless, with more childless men than women. Childless men in the working class are mostly single (8 out of 10), while these men in the upper middle class are mostly in a partnership (9 out of 14). The analysis is based upon the recording of children in the network maps and the conversations that followed. An open coding procedure in ATLAS.ti was employed (Keim et al. 2009), and codes related to social influence and social learning were extracted.

A first examination of the network maps revealed that gender differences were evident in three respects. First, men put down fewer children in their maps than women do. Secondly, men have smaller networks, some consisting of only a few persons. Thirdly, in the nearest circle men tend to include family only, while women also include friends. Hence, men's

social networks are more limited than those of women, and children have a very modest place. Furthermore, the network maps suggest variation both by class as upper middle class women more than working class, indicate many children in their environments. The first research question, whether men have fewer children in their environment than women have, is confirmed both by statistics and in among the qualitative respondents. The second research question, if children occupy a different space in men's normative system among friends than among women, is explored below.

Initially the responses to our questions do not confirm that men want children to a lesser degree than women do. Nearly all male respondents give a positive answer when asked if they want to have children. Children are part of the normative system. Only one man, close to his thirties, is clear that he does not want children. He has no completed education but has been at the university on-and-off, and works as a waiter for a low salary. He justifies his choice of no-child by his childhood and a child hostile world. His partner agreed with him initially but is about to change her mind. The different opinions cause tensions in the relationship and he is not sure how this will end (man, working class, partner, no child).

The 'no-child-option' was not expressed by other men but some added an element of resistance or anxiety, like one wanting a 'ready-made package' of an older child to avoid the baby and toddler -phase (man, upper middle class, partner, no child). Sometimes this resistance was specified like 'I can only see dribbling and nappy's ... and screaming.' Still, this man has watched his comrades being nuts about their babies, and assumes there must be some awards which he has yet to comprehend (man, working class, single, no child).

Motives for wanting children include joy in life, reductions in egotism, changes in life focus, the strengthening of conjugal bonds, the continuation of one's genes, of one's own flesh and blood, and less loneliness in old age. Moving beyond the norm, however, revealed that the strength of desires for children varies, as do the role of networks in having children.

Men's networks

Men do not talk about children

Childless men do not question the normative system, but their readiness to have children is impacted by the social context. The interviews confirmed that children are marginal in network-talking for men. Among working-class men, the influence of networks comes across men's stories in differing forms. One man in his mid-30s appreciated having a friend who are childless like himself, since, *'Then I don't need to stress [laughing]. Now I am "okeeey"'* (man, working class, single, no child). When asked what kind of stress, he specifies *'finding a woman'*. Another, in his early twenties, referred to the more general pressure in society towards having children: *'Very many will experience [a pressure], at least as they get older and watch people of your own age.... as I see everybody around me having children and I feel ready, then I will feel pressure that it is about time'* (man, working class, single, no child). A third man in his mid-30s noted that more of his friends were having children, but still he was enjoying his childless life and felt there was much to lose: *'you see, I have turned into such a football man, and I am sure I could not sit at a pub watching Champions League, like I did yesterday, together with my lads [laughing]'* (man, working class, single, no child). He appreciated his long-term bachelor life-style. He wants to have children, but in his mid-thirties he is not yet ready. Several men had a variation of this story.

Friends are 'lost' into fatherhood, and social life depends on some staying 'behind'. Childless men recognize a social influence, but direct pressure is not common and can even be rejected, as one, a man at the end of his twenties, claimed: *'[you are] talking to the wrong person there ... yes, I don't give in!'* (man working class, single, no child). Nevertheless, indirect pressure stemming from society at large is evident. This can be a feeling of parents wanting grandchildren, but can also stem from watching friends. But normative pressure is seldom explicit in networks of men. Rather, an indirect form prevails. As some get started, the feeling that it is 'about time' is strengthened. Also childless men want children but not passionately.

Do fathers discuss the matter with childless friends? One man with a friend who *'has enough*

to think about himself' (man, working class, partner, child) reported that: *'I use to say that this [having a child] is the best thing happening to me. They [the childless] don't know what they miss, really. ... But, this is an individual matter, really.'* This man illustrates the important distinction. Fathers are very enthusiastic about their children, but the childless men view fathers with ambiguity. Mostly, fathers and the childless men do not discuss these matters. The man quoted above advocated the benefits of fatherhood but avoided intervening in his friend's rejection. Children are not an issue man to man. Still, indirectly a desire to have a child *forms a pressure* as more friends have children. Gradually their social life depends on others staying 'behind'.

Similarly, also among men in the upper middle class, children are not a central issue, as one childless man noted: *'I have never talked ... no, never talked directly with friends about having children'* (man, upper middle class, single, no child). What these men often talk about is finding a partner, *'but ... children are not an issue'*, the man above continued. He had observed that several of his friends had become fathers last year, *'but I don't – for sure – talk about my situation...'*. Nevertheless, by observing that friends go *'one step further'*, as he formulated it, he *'experienced [...] a kind of pressure also. Definitely.'* Another man in his thirties and in the middle of building up his career had seen most of his friends become fathers: *'...instead of being dragged into the child-family- role ... I could in a way live in this single-or-couple-childless-bubble. In that way my life could continue as now'* (man, upper middle class, single, no child). No one had talked to him about having children, but they had told him to find a partner and to socialize more and work less. To single men a partner is an issue, but children are not.

Turning to childless men with partners we find that they do not discuss children with other men either. When asked if friends' children have an impact on their own desires for children the answer is likely to be confirmative but vague, like

'Yes, I guess, a little. If there were no children in my inner circle, I would maybe not give children much thought. It has some influence. I guess. Like ... "everybody has children why shouldn't [I]" ... It is very natural to have children, one assumes' (man, upper middle class, partner, no child). Through observing friends, another wanted to *'see how they change, and that they manage to have children. Then, maybe you get a bit tempted to ... maybe you too can manage to have children'* (man, upper middle class, partner, no child). In an exceptional

case, where friends had discussed the matter, the issue was to avoid rather than to have children *'Absolutely not. Rather to the contrary. They think I should not have children now, but wait ...'* (man, upper middle class, partner, no child).

The statement indicates an element of social learning. He was not yet at the threshold level, but a bandwagon effect is likely to gain momentum as more friends become fathers, putting the latent desire for children under pressure. Single men may receive hints from friends about finding a partner. Men already in partnerships may have more direct hints.

Men with partners are exposed to different networks than bachelors and at some stage the point from being childless to being a father is crossed. These meet other couples and in such networks conversations about children are more likely. This was the case for one father, in his mid-thirties, who recently had a child after living with his partner for more than a decade. Friends of the couple had started dropping hints: *'Ye-e-es, like that, "Shouldn't you two have a child now" and "When will it happen?" It was quite like that'* (man, upper middle class, partner, child). Gradually other couples had a child, until *'by now it is about everyone, just now, at least [laughing].'* He continued: *'It was very motivating watching friends becoming parents. I have to say so. It was easy to imagine yourself being fine as a parent as well.'* Hints may be dropped. Chattering among men, however, does not come out as a central issue. It is social learning through watching others, which in this case had a positive impact.

The observation that men do not talk about children cuts across classes, but circumstances differ. Most childless working-class men are also single, while the majority of men in the upper middle class have a partner. But what other people do is a channel of social influence in both groups. Men watch colleagues, distant relationships such as school mates with whom they do not stay in personal contact, but still may hear about, or simply picking up the normative standard of families with children in the media and their surroundings. A threshold level is reached as their feeling of being left behind grows. Their desire to have children depends on what other people do. Men in partnerships and with children are more likely to discuss children than bachelors, but now in their partner's network rather than their own.

Her, not his network

The passage to fatherhood is not necessarily planned, most clearly so among working-class men, as one stated: *'Amor in drunkenness, you see [laughing]. But afterwards I did take responsibility. [...] I wanted a child, of course'* (man, working class, partner, child).

Fatherhood preceded any reflections: *'not before I was there, quite simply'* another stated (man, working class, partner, child). To these men fatherhood was not anchored in a network. But when a network was indicated, it did not consist of men.

One suspects that the strong desire of his partner to have a child was spurred through her network. His child was a surprise. He was in his thirties, and the partner had, *'yes, she talked about it very often, she did. She talked about getting a child all the time. I said it is not the time yet.'* But when her sister had a baby, *'then it just happened.'* His first reaction was:

'... how the hell could this happen? How is it possible? ... Then it appeared that she had forgotten [the pill] ... I was a bit - 'forgotten'? I thought it was strange and was very suspicious. [...] She had talked about it for so long, then this was an accident hm-m- I don't know.' (man, working class, partner, child). He does not want another child, but his partner wants 'a full football-team'. To this man, his partner's sister, he suspected, made her go along with having a child, even despite his wishes. For this man the ideal was confronted with reality.

Fatherhood is not always part of the plan, but once the line is crossed, men are more likely to meet with other couples, both with and without children. Here children are central and the social influence on childless couples more direct. As one father put it, *'We [his partner and himself] try to push couples in their social circle a bit ... "When are you going to have a baby?" At least those who have been together for a long time'* (man, working class, partner, child). When a child is born, planned or not, fathers typically are pleased with the situation, and some engage in convincing their friends. But these will mostly be couples who are on the brink of having children and anchored in their partners', not their own networks of bachelor friends.

This comes through even more strongly among men in the upper middle class as in the case for a man in his late twenties. He had been living with his partner for about a decade. As *'all her friends are starting having children, then we feel that maybe we are at a standstill'* (man, upper middle class, partner, no child). He clearly felt the time was approaching and that the social influence was coming from her network, as he continued: *'it has a big impact that everyone around us has children.'* Several men had lived with their partners for a long time without children. Time and again they said there was *'a rush, where half of her friends had got a child and she wanted very much to have a child too'*. This man continued:

'...there is a pressure ... and in particular from female friends, I think. Women are bad in this way. They want, in a way ... to follow each other, and would like to have children as close as possible in ages, I think. Then there are comrades, but here pressure is more like ... it is as, well just to get it over with, do it now, instead of delaying. Because it [the pressure] will not lessen' (man, upper middle class, partner, child).

Networks of women and men operate in opposite directions, he claims. Among women pressure builds up as more friends have children. Children are unavoidable, and men may as well give in. An exceptional statement of impact from male friends came from one man who had recently become a father. A first child was born after many years in a partnership. He belongs to a group of hunters. His friends represented the normative system, and through having a child he avoided being regarded as deviant:

' ... when you have ... pals who all have children, and I go hunting with them, and they ask "OK, what about you, are you going to have a baby soon?" like that... and colleagues as well ... about the same. Then I don't think many were surprised.' (man, upper middle class, partner, child).

A threshold level of resistance was reached after lengthy negotiations with their partners, a matter raised by men in the upper middle class in particular. Typically they wanted to wait, sometimes for years. One of them, an engineer close to his thirties, stated: *'My wife wanted a child sooner, and I wanted to wait. Hence, we married first. Maybe we then would decide to have children. It was my wife being very eager to have children.'* To him marrying was a strategy of delaying. Few of his friends or colleagues had children. When asked whether there was pressure on him to have a child, he answered:

'It is not without reason named 'baby-boom', that is, if some start having, then others also want ... or some have. But if this is pressure or desire ... that ... yes, maybe it is a little bit of pressure. To make a successful family. To do what others do.' (man, upper middle class, partner, soon to have a child).

For many men, children are born through *pressure from the partners' network*. But notably, having children are also seen as a success among men.

Children: status and ambivalence

Children are an important ingredient of a normative system signifying respect, experience, achievement and success. This came out among men across classes. One working-class man in his late twenties explained that children can balance a lack of achievement at work, as *'it is important to demonstrate that you can also make it outside your workplace'* (man, working class, single, no child). Another, in his mid-twenties, compared a life without children as *'a drunkard at 35 ... with open shirt and brownish solarium colour at Gran Canarias. ... I rather want to have children'* (man, working class, single, no child).

Also in the upper middle class, fatherhood is associated with status

'Yes, you don't want to be lesser. ... maybe, if you see the whole gang entering a new phase, you will join them. ... you ... well, you interact with people having children and want to be part of the gang, or how I would say this.' (man, upper middle class, partner, no child).

He thinks his time is approaching. He does not express a burning desire for a child but finds it OK to be *'part of the crowd'*. Watching friends, he becomes *'a little inspired'*, but he can also manage without. Another said that he wanted children, *'but not at any price'*. To men, falling in love with a woman who insisted on having a child, giving in may be the price of continuing the relationship. But ambivalence prevails. One man reasons that his life would be more balanced with a child, but he is also afraid of becoming confined to the home and losing his freedom. Other men say they have not given having children much thought, like a single academic in his mid-thirties. He was surprised when making the network map and finding that most of his closest friends had children: *'I have never thought about that'* (man, upper middle, single, no child). Again ambivalence was expressed as he continued: *'I have anyway not thought that "Oh, I want a child too", I have not. ... No, I don't think so.'*

Despite ambivalence, children are a sign of fulfilment. As more friends become fathers with yourself remaining without, there is a feeling that you may have *'missed the wagon'*, as one person close to his thirties expressed it. His friends had produced many children. He started counting but got lost: *'They were a whole crowd just last year'* (man, upper middle, single, no child). Without having planned for it, this man realized that his friends had moved on, and that he himself was lagging behind.

While children are viewed matter-of-fact among working class men with a partner, to men in

the upper middle class may live with a partner and crossing the border from childlessness to fatherhood is subject to many considerations. At the end of the day, children are wanted and expected, but seldom experienced as a strong drive. Fertility is influenced by social contexts in which children are associated with normality and status and where a bandwagon effect is formed, primarily through pressure from networks of the partner's female friends. The contrast with women's networks is striking.

Women's networks

Children in waves

Women generally expressed desires for children from their early teenage years. The meaning of children was articulated in terms like wanting someone to depend completely on themselves, meaning of life, linking partners for eternity and symbolizing unconditional love. Several remarked that the timing of having children is spurred by a close, female friend having a child. While men typically said that friends became less available after having children, children draw women's networks more closely together. Networks of female friends are sites for 'child talks'.

Few working-class women questioned having children, as one in her mid-twenties expressed it: *'what else is there to do? ... Children are [my] life in future'* (woman, working class, partner, no child). The desire for children is *a personal drive*, but as some have a first child the snowball starts rolling. Those who start the process say that their friends follow them, even at young ages. A woman with two closely spaced children illustrates this. They were not planned, but *'I always wanted children'* (woman, working class, partner, child). Her children have changed her life perspective and given her life energy, she told us. She was still in her early twenties, and most of her friends, she counts eight, had children. She was the first one, but now: *'It is just as if more dare when they see others having children ... It is strange actually ... but when seeing others having, they want to too ...'* Her own children had not been born through the influence of her networks but might be having a bandwagon effect on her friends. Women confess having discussions with friends, sometimes more than with partners, as was the case for the next one. She strongly wanted a child, even though she was not *'... a baby person... I am not the first to haul myself over a newborn baby'* (woman, working class, partner, child). Having a child is 'part of the package.' In her nearest network circle there had been a sudden wave of having children. Despite not being a 'baby person',

her social life became completely centred on children. Relationships with childless friends were more questioned, as she had told them that they were welcome to visit, *'even if we have a child.'* She is part of a larger child environment, where childless people no longer have an obvious position. Children are social glue, connecting her to other parents, as other women also noted. One said that the family moved to a neighbourhood with others *'in our situation'* (woman, working class, partner, child). She too had little time for childless friends. Having children was a personal drive, but a social influence was apparent through her wish to have children at the same time as her female friends. In the next phase, children have had a great impact on her everyday life, being the centre of her social networks.

Women in the upper middle class also spoke about friends having children in a wave, like one who had been living with her partner for about fifteen years. As she had recently had her first child, she found herself in the midst of a *'giant boom'*. Her friends *'get more and more, actually a real boom right now... [laughs]'* (woman, upper middle, partner, child). The couple used to socialize with other childless people. Now they have shifted mainly towards people with children: *'It is something to do with the tempo ... and the same kind of understanding, or, yes, tolerance for things being a bit so and so...'* Friends' childbearing is *'infectious! Yes, obviously, it is infecting you, clearly. I know incredibly many who are now at home with a child'* (woman, upper middle, partner, child). Friends have an impact on the timing, and in the next phase children tend to accentuate a change in network membership towards other parents. *'Child talks'* are part of women's networks in the upper middle classes even long before childbearing.

'That you can go pram-pushing together with someone else and that you do not completely disappear into this "baby fog", but have friends in the same situation ... and who are in the same rhythm as one self. We have talked about that. And also, of course, it is nice to have children at the same age who can later be friends' (woman, upper middle, partner, no child).

But *'child talks'* are also made with caution. A medical doctor has two close friends with children of the same ages as her own two. The three friends did not plan this since *'it is a bit sensitive, this issue, since you never know if ... yes, if you succeed. [...] But I think we all knew it ... [laughs]'* (woman, upper middle class, partner, child). It was *'in the air'*. Children of similar ages strengthened their relationships, as this meant *'enormously much for the*

friendship. [...] We had much in common already, but now we have even more. In a way we can share experiences.’ Children create a common meaning structure for friendships among women. Like men, women observe that friends can manage, and networks give access to social learning through watching friends. Unlike in the case of men, however, children play a large role in women’s interaction with friends.

Fertility and personal networks

Children are a result of the most intimate and personal behaviour. Yet, it is patterned by social structures. Poor and rich countries have different fertility patterns, as do countries in the Northern and Southern parts of Europe. Common to the rich countries is the extended life phase before having a child. But also this extension is patterned by the social context. This paper has examined the differences among women and men, as well as by working class and upper middle class people. My structural focus is at the immediate social environment of young people. We have seen that men have a much longer extension of their childless phase than women have. In the growing group of men who continue to live without children as ‘a normal part of life’ the suggestion of a ‘Low fertility trap’ reinforcing a downward fertility trend seems plausible. The life without children does not appear to be part of a plan. Rather, step by step this is an end point. Some are surprised when asked to make a network map and realizing that friends have entered fatherhood. They were not aware of the process, had not thought about it. Some regretted the situation and felt they had ‘lost the wagon’. Some felt there was no hurry. They had plans to accomplish which were at odds with care responsibilities for children.

To men, unlike women, there is also the need for a suitable partner in order to have a child. In our ninety respondents an interaction between partnership and childbearing surfaced. At early stages of a relationship the partners would check-out the ‘child-issue’. In most cases both agreed that they wanted a child. But there were also cases where one wanted, while the other did not. More common where cases where one wanted sooner, while the other wanted later. In most cases with different fertility expectations, the women had clearer plans than men had. Exceptions were found, such as in cases where the man was older, or had less education, than the woman and she wanted to finish her education. In these, fewer cases, he was ready and she was not. But mostly the opposite was true. The steps into parenthood differed between working and upper middle classes. In the working class the pregnancy could come as a

surprise, at least to the man. In the upper middle class couples could negotiate over many years until sometimes also here the pregnancy was a surprise – to the man. In general much effort was put on reaching an agreement. As individuals working their way through the twenties and thirties, many will find that the social environment, friends and siblings in particular, are in a similar process.

This analysis has revealed that men and women share a normative system where children are ‘a normal part of life’ (Lutz et al. 2006: 188). However, behaviour varies. Gender, work and class work in concert. The eagerness, reasons for and timing of having children are dissimilar among men and women, and – although less prominent – between classes. Children are taken for granted – or just happen – more often for the working class. Personal networks function very differently for men and women. Men are less exposed to children in their personal networks than women, they seldom talk about childbearing with other men, and ambivalence with respect to children prevails. Observations of friends with children work in both directions. Fear can lessen as they see friends managing. But hesitation can also grow as friends become bound up with responsibilities, no longer join in at the pub, are ‘locked into the home’ or ‘lose freedom’. Friends ‘become lost’ by having children. Some see children as a hindrance to their working lives and may seek to ‘keep the family small’, as Gerson suggests (2010). Men refer to their partners’ networks as pipelines of influence and experience a bandwagon effect through their partner’s friends’ childbearing. By contrast, children link women together. Women meet; talk over phone and exchange worries and joys. They have children in waves, explosions, giant booms, as if it were infectious. Parents seek together. They share common interests, tempos, the same rhythms or tolerance for children. Children create a common meaning structure (Mische 2011). Relationships with the childless are questioned. Children both generate and split up friendships but individuals who are not a part of this meaning structure are increasing in numbers and they are primarily men.

Unlike most European countries, fertility in Norway is relatively high and has increased over the last decades. A low fertility trap (Lutz et al. 2006) seems irrelevant in this context.

However, this study confirms the relevance of the hypothesis through unveiling a gendered fertility trap in process. The trends in childlessness among highly educated men and women work in opposite directions; growing among the men and declining among the women. Why do a growing group of men remain childless in a country with explicit gender-friendly family

policies, promoting gender equality in the labour market and at home? One needs to understand that impacts of family policies supporting mother's employment, and the policies promoting father's child care, may have different appeals to young women and men. Maybe the observation that ideologies of gender equality are widely accepted but hard to fulfil is useful also to understand fertility development among young Norwegian men. Their ambivalence to fatherhood may be grounded in a fear of impediment on their employment. The strategy is to delay or avoid children. Such a strategy may add to our understanding why childlessness is increasing among the group of men who historically had most to gain on fatherhood, the ambivalence among the highly educated men.

References

- Andersson, G., Rønsen, M., Knudsen, L., Lappegård, T., Neyer, G., Skrede, K., Teschner, K. and Vikat, A. (2008) *Cohort fertility patterns in the Nordic Countries*, MPIDR Working Paper WP 2008-008.
- Bernardi, L. (2003) 'Channels of Social Influence on Reproduction'. *Population Research and Policy Review*, 22, pp. 527- 555.
- Bernardi, L. Oppo, A. (2008): 'Female-centred Family Configurations and Fertility'. In Widmer E. and R. Jallinoja (eds.), *Beyond the Nuclear Family: Families in a Configurational Perspective*, Peter Lang Editor, pp. 175-202.
- Bernhardt, E. (2000) *Unga vuxnas syn på familj och arbete: rapport från en enkätundersökning*. Stockholm: Centrum för kvinnoforskning.
- Bottero, W. and Irwin, S. (2003) 'Locating difference: class, 'race' and gender, and the shaping of social inequalities'. *The Sociological Review*, pp.463-483.
- Bumpass, L., Rindfuss, R. Choe, M.K. and Tsuya, N. (2009) 'The Institutional Context of Low Fertility: the case of Japan'. *Asian Population Studies*, Vol. 5, Issue 3, pp. 215-235.
- Gerson, K. (1993) 'A Few Good Men'. *The American Prospect*, December 1, p. 78-90.
- Gerson, K. (2010) 'Falling Back on Plan B: The Children of the Gender Revolution Face Unchartered Territory'. In Risman, B. J. (ed.) *Families as They Really Are*. W.W. Norton, pp. 378-392.

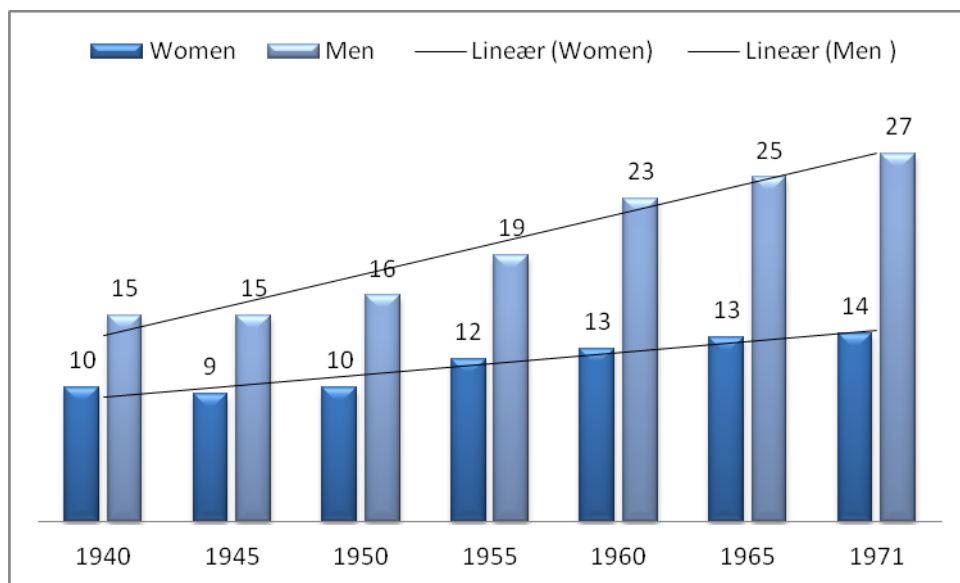
- Gillis, J. R. (2000) 'Marginalization of Fatherhood in Western Countries'. *Childhood*, Vol. 7, No. 2, pp. 225-238.
- Granovetter, M. S. (1973) 'The Strength of Weak Ties'. *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 78, No. 6, pp. 1360-1380.
- Granovetter, M. (1978) 'Threshold Models of Collective Behaviour'. *The American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 83, No. 6, pp. 1420-1443.
- Jensen, A.-M. (1998) 'Partnership and Parenthood in contemporary Europe: a review of recent findings.' *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 14, No. 1: 89-99
- Jensen, A.-M. (2004) 'Harde fakta om myke men'. In Ellingsæter, A.L. and Leira, A. (eds.) *Velferdstaten og familien..* Oslo, Gyldendal Akademisk, pp. 201-227.
- Keim, S., Klärner, A., Bernardi, L. (2009) *Who is relevant? Exploring fertility relevant social networks*. MPIDR Working Paper-001, Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research.
- Kohler, H.P., Behrman, J. R. and Watkins, S. C. (2001) 'The density of social networks and fertility decisions: evidence from South Nyanza District, Kenya'. *Demography*, Vol. 38, No. 1, pp. 43-58.
- Kravdal, Ø. and Rindfuss, R. R. (2008) 'Changing relationship between education and fertility: a study of women and men born 1960-64'. *American Sociological Review*, Vol. 73, No. 5, pp. 854-873.
- Lappegård, T. and Rønsen, M. (2005) 'The Multifaceted Impact of Entry into Motherhood.' *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 21, pp. 31-49.
- Lutz, W., Skirbekk, V. and Testa, M. R. (2006) 'The Low Fertility Trap Hypothesis: Forces that may lead to further postponement and fewer births in Europe'. *Vienna Yearbook of Population Research* p.167-192.
- Lyngstad, T. and Noack, T. (2005) 'Vil de velge bort familien? En analyse av unge nordmenns ekteskaps- og fruktbarhetsintensjoner'. *Tidsskrift for velferdsforskning*, vol. 8, no.3, pp. 120-134.
- Mische, A. (2011) 'Relational Network Analysis, Culture and Agency'. The Sage Handbook of Social Network Analysis, Scott, J. and Carrington, P. Sage

Publications Ltd.,

http://rci.rutgers.edu/~mische/Mische_relational_sociology.pdf

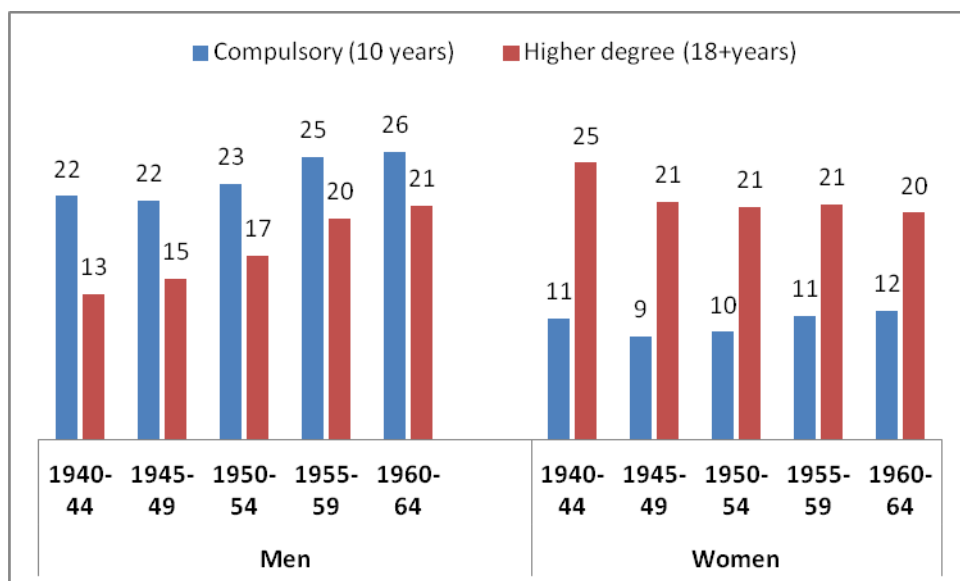
- Raub, W. and Weesie, J. (1990) 'Reputation and Efficiency in Social Interactions: an example of network effects'. *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 96, No. 3, pp. 626-54.
- Rossier, C. and Bernardi, L. (2009) 'Social interaction effects on fertility: intentions and behaviour'. *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 25, pp. 467-485.
- Rønsen, M. and Skrede, K. (2010) 'Can public policies sustain fertility in the Nordic countries? Lessons from the past and questions for the future'. *Demographic Research*: Vol. 22, Article: 13, pp. 321- 346.
- Skrede, K (2004) 'Færre menn blir fedre', *Economic Analyses*, No. 6, Oslo, Statistics Norway.
- Sobotka, T. and Testa, M. R. (2008) 'Attitudes and Intentions Toward Childlessness in Europe'. In Höhn, C., Avramov, D. , Kotowska, I. E. (eds.) *People, Population Change and Policies: Lessons from the Population Policy Acceptance Study*, Vol. 1, Family Change, Springer Press., pp. 177-214.
- Valente, T. W. (1996) 'Social network thresholds in the diffusion of innovations'. *Social Networks* 18, pp. 69-89.

Figure 1 Childless women and men at age 40 by year of birth. Norway.



Source: Statistics Norway, 2012 <http://www.ssb.no/emner/02/02/10/fodte/tab-2012-04-11-09.html>

Figure 2: Childlessness by birth cohorts, educational level and gender at age 40. % Norway



Source: Kravdal, Ø. and R.R. Rindfuss (2008)

¹ This paper is elaborated from the book chapter 'Male talk about children: at the crossroads of gender and class', in A.L. Ellingsæter, A.-M. Jensen and M. Lie (eds) *The Social meaning of children and fertility change in Europe* (in process)

² Data were collected as part of the research project *The Social Meaning of Children: Reproductive Choice, Gender and Social Class*, supported by the Research Council of Norway, grant no. 190813/V10.

³ This picks up Granovetter's point that norms and values do not correspond to behavior.

⁴ An observation also made by Bott (1956).

⁵ For example, in Norway 19 per cent of men age 34-39 did not live with children, compared to 10 per cent of women in the same age group. In France the proportions were 24 and 12 per cent, and in Germany-West 35 and 25 per cent respectively.

⁶ Although a decline took place in 2011 <http://www.ssb.no/emner/02/02/10/fodte/tab-2012-04-11-09.html>

⁷ However, the field of education shows large variations (Lappegård and Rønsen, 2005).

⁸ Expanding the age limit to 50, one in five men still has no children, which is also a strong increase.