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First Education, then Children?

A Qualitative Study of Students' Childbearing Attitudes and Intentions

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**First Education, then Children?\***  
**A Qualitative Study of Students' Childbearing Attitudes and Intentions**

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**Abstract:** In all Western countries, students have significantly lower fertility than non-students of the same age. Extended education is therefore considered one of the most important factors behind the postponement of first birth. This study investigates students' childbearing intentions and the motivations behind them through individual in-depth interviews with 25 childless students enrolled in higher education in Sweden. The results suggest that the postponement of childbearing until completion of education is above all a question of economic security. The importance of completing one's education and achieving economic security is weakened by age, however, and the biological risks associated with postponement of childbearing are found to be a significant factor in particularly the female students' childbearing intentions. Mental well-being and knowing what you want to do with your life are also important preconditions in this regard. A sense of being on the "right" educational track increases the feeling of security and the inclination to have children. On most issues, male and female students reasoned along the same lines. One gender difference, however, was that female students had much more knowledge about the parental leave insurance system, and parental leave and their benefit level was something they took into account, and planned for, to a greater extent than men did.

**Keywords:** students, childbearing intentions, gender, qualitative interviews, Sweden

\*This paper is also available as a *Stockholm Research Report in Demography*

## Introduction

In the Western world, students have significantly lower fertility than non-students of the same age (Andersson 2000; Hoem 2000; Thalberg 2011), and both men and women with higher education enter parenthood later in life. Extended education is therefore considered one of the most important factors behind the postponement of first birth (e.g. Blossfeld and Huinink 1991; Lappegård and Rønsen 2005; Liefbroer and Corijn 1999; Rindfuss et al. 1996). The postponement of childbearing may be positive in a number of ways, for instance resulting in more mature and economically stable parents, but it also has negative consequences for both individuals and society. As fecundity declines with age, particularly for women (e.g. Larsen and Vaupel 1993; Dunson et al. 2002), postponement may lead to young adults running the risk of not being able to have any children whatsoever or having fewer children than they wish, and the need for costly assisted reproduction increases. Having children late in life also increases health risks for both mother and child (Waldenström 2008). This study explores the possible reasons behind low fertility of students through individual in-depth interviews. The overall research question guiding the study is: *What are students' childbearing intentions and how are they motivated?*

Low fertility among students may have many explanations. The most obvious is perhaps that students' low or non-existent earnings are generally not perceived to be compatible with the establishment of a family with children, an explanation also supported by an earlier (quantitative) study of mine which found childbearing propensities among female students to be clearly related to earnings (Thalberg 2011). In Sweden, the design of the parental leave system likely contributes to the low-earnings factor among students as the level of parental leave benefits is based on an individual's prior earnings. Since paid parental leave is comparatively long in Sweden – most mothers stay at home for at least a year – the benefit level is essential. In another previous study I found a stronger negative effect of mothers' enrolment in education on couples' further childbearing propensities as compared to fathers' enrolment (Thalberg 2012). One interpretation is that this is related to mothers' longer parental leaves and their dependence on establishing sufficient earnings before the leave. Low fertility among students may also involve aspects such as student lifestyles not being seen as compatible with having children, or social norms about the sequencing of life events whereby completing one's education precedes family formation. In Sweden, what is considered the ideal age for having a first child is several years younger than the

actual average age at birth of first child (Statistics Sweden 2009), which suggests that the postponement of childbearing to some extent may be “involuntary”.

The low fertility among students and the discrepancy between ideal and actual age at first birth raise questions related to the prerequisites for family formation. To what extent do students perceive that they are constrained by economic and family policy factors? Are there other factors at play, such as lifestyle or social norms regarding the sequencing of life events? Another question is why mothers’ enrolment in education, as suggested by earlier studies, seems to be a greater obstacle to further childbearing than fathers’ enrolment. In the study at hand, these questions are addressed by conducting 25 individual in-depth interviews with childless students aged 25 and upwards.

### **Preconditions for childbearing and Swedish context**

There is a vast body of research on factors affecting childbearing behaviour. Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) list five preconditions as having particular importance for the decision to enter parenthood: being in a partnership, having completed one’s education, having a home of one’s own, being employed with an adequate income and, finally, having a sense of security. These preconditions have also been shown as relevant in a Swedish context (Bergnéhr 2008; Ström and Bernhardt 2012). Below, the preconditions stated by Hobcraft and Kiernan, as well as other factors pointed out as important for childbearing decisions in the literature, will be discussed, along with the Swedish context.

As suggested above, completing one’s education is one of the most important reasons behind delayed childbearing. This factor is of particular relevance in Sweden, as Swedish students are relatively older in an international comparison, in terms of both age at enrolment and age at completion of university-level education. The average age for completing a first degree is 29.5 years (Ministry of Finance 2011), and one in three students is above 30 (Swedish National Agency for Higher Education 2003). The higher age of students is likely related to relatively fewer students going directly from secondary to tertiary education; it has become customary to either work abroad or at home for some time, or travel or pursue non-university studies before entering higher education. The flexible educational system also allows students to change their educational track or take time off during their studies and then re-enter education. Other reasons

may be that university studies are free of charge and that the government offers fairly generous student financial aid.<sup>1</sup>

Previous studies indicate that completing one's education and getting established on the labour market before having children is more important for women than for men (Hoem and Bernhardt 2000; Jalovaara and Miettinen 2013; Löfström 2003). This may be due to women to a larger extent expecting their opportunities on the labour market to be negatively affected by having children (Kugelberg 2000; Löfström 2003). Even though few Swedish students have children while enrolled in education, it is more common in Sweden and the other Nordic countries than elsewhere in Europe (Billari and Philipov 2004). While enrolment seems to prevent students from having children, having children does not appear to prevent parents from (re)entering education. Since the 1990s the share of students with children has grown continuously, especially among female students (Hallberg et al. 2011). Figures from Statistics Sweden indicate that about a third of all females and about 13 per cent of males enrolled in a university education are parents (Ministry of Health and Social Affairs 2003).

Several studies suggest that housing suitable for family life is an important precondition for family formation, in Sweden as well as in other European countries (e.g. Bergnéhr 2009; Rijken and Knijn 2009; Ström 2010). Given the constrained housing market in many European cities, this precondition may be particularly difficult to achieve for students and others with low income. A number of studies have also confirmed the importance of income and economic security when it comes to childbearing decisions (e.g. Andersson 2000; Hoem 2000; Statistics Sweden 2001). Under conditions of economic uncertainty, people tend to postpone childbearing until their income is more reliable (Andersson 2000; Blossfeld et al. 2005; Bygren et al. 2005). "A sense of security", however, involves considerations regarding not only whether one is able to provide for a child privately, but also whether society will help to provide and care for a new generation (Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995). A well-developed welfare state reduces the risks of having children (McDonald 2002), and it has been suggested that trust in the welfare state has a positive impact on fertility in the Nordic countries (Ellingsaeter and Pedersen 2013).

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<sup>1</sup> All students below age 54 are entitled to student financial aid for a maximum of six years. This aid consists of a non-repayable grant plus a loan to be repaid at relatively low interest (The Swedish National Board of Student Aid 2008). Students with children are also entitled to an extra child supplement, based on the number of children.

Many studies indicate that family policies are important for childbearing decisions (see for example Esping-Andersen 1999; Hoem 1993; McDonald 2000; Oláh and Bernhardt 2008; Rindfuss 1991). Family policies reflect which behaviours are expected, or at least supported, by the government. As such family policies create as well as maintain societal norms, and there is an on-going interplay between social development, normative development, and policy responses. If policies do not correspond to existing norms and the way people want to live their lives, these policies could have an inhibiting effect on childbearing behaviour (Neyer and Andersson 2008; McDonald 2000). In Sweden, family policy is strongly oriented towards a dual-earner/dual-carer family in which both parents participate on the labour market as well as in child care (Ferrarini and Duvander 2010; Gornick and Meyers 2008; Korpi 2000). One of the cornerstones of Swedish family policy is the parental leave insurance. The insurance presently entitles parents to a total of 480 days' paid leave with 80 per cent wage replacement for each child.<sup>2</sup> Except for two months that are earmarked for each parent, the parents can freely divide the leave between them. To be entitled to the generous earnings-related parental insurance one has to work a minimum of 240 days before the birth of a child, which rules out most students, who instead receive a benefit at a low flat rate.<sup>3,4</sup> The fact that the parental leave benefit is based on an individual's prior earnings creates a strong incentive for getting established on the labour market prior to having a child.<sup>5</sup> While the Swedish educational system is rather flexible and to some extent supports a "disorder of life-course" (Rindfuss et al. 1987), the parental insurance system (even though flexible in many other ways) encourages a more traditional sequencing of life events.

Apart from basic material requirements and societal preconditions, individual-level factors such as preferences, values, and attitudes also influence childbearing intentions and decisions (Billari and Philipov 2004; Liefbroer 1999). Other factors that have been shown as important in this regard are the achievement of a sense of self-fulfilment, readiness and maturity, and "having done other things first", such as travel and just being young and not-yet-responsible (Bergnéhr 2008).

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<sup>2</sup> Besides legislated parental insurance, many employers pay an additional 10 per cent to employees on parental leave, which means that employees in fact receive 90 per cent of their earnings during parental leave.

<sup>3</sup> A student who has worked at least 240 days before entering education may, however, be entitled to parental leave insurance based on the previous income if the student is receiving full-time student financial aid.

<sup>4</sup> This low flat rate has recently been raised from about 7 EUR/day (*before tax*) to the current rate of 21 EUR/day.

<sup>5</sup> This is particularly important for mothers who normally take the first 180 days of the leave, which are based on the income prior to the child's birth. For the remaining leave days, the benefit is based on the income at the time of the leave.

As pointed out by Hobcraft and Kiernan, having a partner is naturally also an important individual-level factor which has an impact on a person's childbearing intentions. Studies on previous generations have found that students enter consensual unions at slightly lower rates than non-students (Hoem 1986), but it is unlikely that this explains more than a fraction of students' lower fertility. Another influential aspect is age, as income level, enrolment and employment status have been shown to have less impact on childbearing for Swedish women above 30 (Andersson 2000; Statistics Sweden 2001; Thalberg 2011).

An additional key to understanding the preconditions for childbearing is gender and how parenthood typically involves different consequences for men and women. During the past 50 years the meaning of fatherhood and expectations on fathers have changed dramatically in Sweden, as they have elsewhere (Hagström 1999; Johansson and Klinth 2008). Norms about masculinity, previously closely related to paid work and breadwinning, have partly been replaced by new ideals in which fathers should be caring, active and participating fathers present in everyday life. This development has been partially policy-driven; since the 1960s, fatherhood in Swedish policy discourse and practice has successively shifted "from cash to care" (Bergman and Hobson 2002). Nevertheless, there seems to be a gap between the strong norm of gender equality and new fatherhood ideals on the one hand and the actual division of labour on the other (e.g. Alsarve and Boye 2012; Bekkengen 2003). For although gender roles have indeed changed in the last decades, the traditional gendered patterns regarding the division of paid work, housework and childrearing still remain. In most Swedish families, fathers still earn the higher income and mothers are the primary caretakers for small children (Blossfeld and Drobnič 2001; Evertsson and Neramo 2007; Statistics Sweden 2011). The use of parental leave insurance clearly illustrates this: in 2011, 76 per cent of parental leave days were used by mothers (Social Insurance Agency 2012). Some argue that while mothers' parental responsibilities are still seen as "compulsory", fathers' parenthood is seen as more "optional", in the sense that they can choose the extent to which they want to take parental leave and participate in childrearing (Bekkengen 2002; Ahrne and Roman 1997). Or, as Johansson and Klinth (2008) put it, men may "pick and choose a suitable parental role". By contrast, women generally adapt their work situation and other commitments to their parenthood, or even to their childbearing intentions.

Finally, it should be emphasized that family formation is a dynamic interactive process in which several aspects mutually influence one other. For example, just as a person's educational situation

may have an impact on childbearing behaviour, having children – or even childbearing intentions – may influence decisions about education. Some evidence indicates that becoming a mother in the Nordic countries has a positive effect on educational attainment while becoming a mother in the United States or Britain has a tendency to lower educational attainment and cause the mother to drop out of school (Billari and Philipov 2004).

## Methods

To determine how students motivate their childbearing intentions and why so few students have children, qualitative methods are appropriate. The possibilities to ask the *how* and *why* questions, and to identify patterns of associations between different factors, are some of the main strengths of qualitative research (Hakim 2000). In this study, students' views of childbearing were elicited in in-depth interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow for respondents to reflect on a certain phenomenon. They tap into societal processes, providing a link which makes the private public. Another advantage of qualitative interviews is that the researcher is in dialogue with the study object and thus has a chance to get feedback and discuss interpretations with the study object itself, so-called *members' check* or *respondent validation* (Ahrne and Svensson 2011:28).

In order to select participants who were likely to have reflected on the issues relevant in this study, five main criteria were formulated: *i*) The respondents had to be childless at the time of the interview. The motivation for this is that it is childbearing *intentions* that are the focus of this paper and the aim was to get insight into the respondents' current thoughts on these issues rather than a retrospective account of childbearing histories coloured by their actual experiences of having children; *ii*) A minimum age was set at 25 years, as for younger students childbearing may seem too distant in the future;<sup>6</sup> *iii*) The respondents had to have a steady partner, as mentioned above, the presence of a partner has a strong influence on childbearing intentions. However, no criterion about sexual orientation was defined;<sup>7</sup> *iv*) The participants had to be full-time students, given that the economic situation and circumstances for part-time students are likely to be different. Further, in order to get as rich material as possible, students from various educational fields, universities and colleges, as well as socioeconomic backgrounds, were selected; *v*) The

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<sup>6</sup> The average age at first birth for young adults born in 1970, who entered any kind of post-secondary education, was 29.4 years for women and 31.8 for men (Statistics Sweden 2013).



participants had to have grown up in Sweden, as including exchange students and other students who had recently arrived in Sweden would have made the analysis too complex.

The participants were found through notices placed on notice boards at several universities and colleges in the Stockholm area during fall and winter 2012/13 (Appendix II). Contrary to many others' experiences, finding respondents was quite unproblematic.<sup>8</sup> As the participants could choose rather freely where and when they wanted to meet for the interviews, they did not have to sacrifice much of their time for this. About half of the interviews were held at Stockholm University and the other half at an office in the city centre,<sup>9</sup> and one interview (Sofia) was held at the respondent's home. In addition, the participants were offered a movie ticket as compensation. Given that movie tickets are quite expensive in Sweden,<sup>10</sup> this is a decent "hourly wage" for a student.

The interviews were conducted by the author, and the technique used was semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions and probes. To make the interviews more systematic an interview guide, i.e. a list of questions intended to be asked, was used during the interviews (Appendix I). This guide included questions about the informants' background and current life situation, but above all dealt with the students' views on family formation. An average interview lasted slightly less than one hour. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed. The material was then categorized around different themes, some of which were based on previous research while some evolved from the interview data themselves. When conducting qualitative interviews, the researcher aims at attaining "saturation", which is the experience of having heard the answers before, that the same pattern of reasoning reoccurs in a number of interviews, and that further interviews would not add to the findings (Small 2009). In this study saturation occurred after about 20 interviews, at which point a few additional interviews were held.

Ultimately, the study population consisted of a total of 25 undergraduate full-time students, 13 females and 12 males. All respondents were childless at the time of the interview. However, one

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<sup>7</sup> In Sweden, lesbian couples are allowed to be inseminated and both female and male same-sex couples who are registered partners or married can apply for adoption.

<sup>8</sup> The first notices I posted had a "gender-neutral design", however it was mostly female students who answered. At that point I posted new notices with the title "Men wanted", and then a good deal of male students volunteered.

<sup>9</sup> The Institute for Futures Studies.

<sup>10</sup> About 11.50 EUR.

male respondent was to become a father within a few months and one female respondent had begun trying to conceive. All but three respondents were cohabiting with their partner; one was in a same-sex relationship while the rest were in heterosexual relationships. A few respondents had at least one parent born outside Sweden, but most had been born to Swedish parents with no recent immigrant background. Table 1 below summarizes the most important characteristics of the interview respondents and their partners.

*Table 1. Selected characteristics of interview respondents*

Name*	Gender	Age	Field of study	Work extra	Partner's age	Partner's main activity
Adam	M	30	History	No	27	Study
Amanda	F	29	Medicine	Yes	34	Work
Anna	F	30	Labour relations and management	No	29	Work
Beatrice	F	37	Ethnology	Yes	37	Work
Caroline	F	25	Nursing	Yes	30	Study
Cecilia	F	25	Sociology	Yes	29	Work
Charlotta	F	25	Political science	No	27	Study
David	M	32	Criminology	Yes	30	Work
Ellen	F	30	Speech therapy	Yes	36	Work
Emily	F	25	Swedish and multilingualism	Yes	26	Work
Erik	M	31	Interpretation and translation	Yes	37	Work
Jakob	M	30	Web design	Yes	25	Study
John	M	27	Global economy	No	25	Study
Karim	M	27	Sociology	No	25	Work
Klara	F	29	Political science	Yes	27	Work
Linda	F	26	Physiotherapy	No	26	Work
Lisa	F	29	Ethnology	No	28	Work
Martin	M	40	Police	Yes	40	Work
Mikael	M	27	Social anthropology	Yes	24	Study
Miriam	F	26	Urban and regional planning	Yes	28	Work
Robin	M	32	Engineering	Yes	31	Study
Sebastian	M	29	Teaching	Yes	34	Work
Sofia	F	30	Medicine	Yes	30	Study
Thomas	M	28	Law	Yes	25	Work
Viktor	M	31	Law	Yes	31	Work

\* All names are pseudonyms

The fact that all respondents lived and studied in the Stockholm area at the time of the interviews may obviously have affected the results; for example the labour and housing market, as well as childbearing behaviour, norms and attitudes, may differ from those of smaller towns and rural areas. However, the respondents had all grown up in different places across Sweden, and several of them reflected on the differences regarding family formation and the transition to adulthood in their hometowns as compared to Stockholm. That most respondents had a partner who was in the labour force may of course also have an impact on their economic possibilities to start a family

and their reasoning about family formation. Another limitation is that the informants, having volunteered to participate in a study dealing with family formation, may be more interested in these issues than other students. However, the interviews revealed great variation in childbearing intentions and attitudes, and some of the respondents did not even know whether or not they wanted to have children. Several also admitted that the main reason they had volunteered for the interview was the movie ticket.

## **Findings**

### **Material preconditions for childbearing**

One aim of this study was to determine the extent to which students' low fertility is associated with their low incomes and other economic constraints. Below, it is discussed how the respondents in this study motivated their childbearing intentions and reasoned around the preconditions for childbearing suggested by Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) and other scholars.

#### *Economic security*

The interview accounts revealed great variation in the respondents' childbearing intentions and underlying motives. For many, the timing of childbearing in relation to their education was a question they had given a great deal of thought:

Caroline (25 years): Yeah, that's a question that's very, that people talk quite a lot about, as I experience it, I mean exactly this. Then it's mostly should I study before I have a child? Or the other way around, it's often that. It feels sort of like that's what the alternatives are.

Among the respondents who intended to complete their education before having children, the current lack of income and economic security was by far the most important motive. Several respondents stated that they would like to have children before completing their education if their economic situation were different. When I asked Adam whether, apart from the economic factors, he saw other disadvantages to having children while being a student, he replied:

Adam (30 years): Yeah, no, I guess it's mostly the financial aspect, because otherwise I think you have, depending on how you organize your studies, it's pretty flexible if you compare it to lots of jobs, so I guess it's not a disadvantage. I guess the problem is the financial part.

For most people “economic security” is synonymous with having a job and an income, and this was the case among the respondents in this study as well. It was clear that it was a feeling of economic security that was important, rather than becoming wealthy in any sense. Several students whose partner was in the labour force argued that it would be enough if one of them had a secure income. For others, particularly female respondents, it was important to have an income of their own before starting a family. For some women this was related to the parental leave benefit, while for others it was related to a reluctance to be economically dependent on a man. However, male respondents also stressed that they did not want to depend on a partner economically, and that both partners should contribute to the household income. Neither male nor female respondents expressed any expectations that the father should be the main breadwinner. A quote from Sofia illustrates how many female respondents reasoned about this:

Sofia (30 years): (...) I think the image of the father as the breadwinner has gotten weaker, then maybe it's stronger in certain groups and in certain places. But I think, at any rate among the girls I hang around with, that you want to support yourself and any future child without thinking you'll be dependent on a guy. You don't want to be supported, and you don't want to depend on it, because that puts you in an awful position in a lot of ways.

Apart from having a job, and in that sense some basic economic security, the respondents hardly brought up any material preconditions for childbearing. Having a particular kind of housing standard before having children, for example, was only mentioned spontaneously by one respondent. When asked whether housing was something the respondents had considered in relation to childbearing, a typical answer was “sure, another room would be nice, but we could easily make room for one small child. But there are other things that are more important.” Even though owning one's apartment or being a first-hand tenant is something that increases the feeling of security – which some of the respondents also mentioned – the overall impression was that housing was not a major factor in the respondents' childbearing intentions.

#### *The importance of family background*

Many accounts centred on the impact of family background in relation to economic security and completing education. Several respondents related their, or their partner's, attitudes towards

economic security to childhood experiences. Linda, for example, attributed her striving for economic security to the difficult economic circumstances under which she grew up:

Linda (26 years): We've talked about kids from the beginning, we've figured that we'll have kids when I've finished my studies and start working, so that there are two of us making money.

Sara: It feels important that both of you have a job?

Linda: Yeah, that would be nice. It's not the most important thing, but it's very important. My parents didn't have much money when we were little. Things can easily get tough, if nothing else.

Respondents who attached less importance to economic security and had more of a "things will work out" attitude seemed to have less personal experience of economic difficulties in their childhood. It was not only childhood experiences that differed widely, however; there was also great variation when it came to the respondents' current economic situation. Many of those who had a more relaxed attitude towards economic security had some kind of basic economic security or back-up, such as a partner with a decent income or income from a part-time job, or had previously had an adequate income on which their parental insurance would be based, or had parents who could help them economically if problems arose. The respondents' future employment prospects also varied largely, of course, and for some it was evident that their feeling of economic security was based on the knowledge that they had good chances of getting a stable job after completing education. The respondents for whom economic security seemed less significant argued that if they just re-prioritised their expenses, like cut down on holidays and eating out, they would be able to provide for a child. Many of these respondents referred to others they knew who had children, and reasoned along the lines of "if they can do it, so can we":

Jakob (30 years): (...) since I won't be a student much longer it hasn't influenced my decision. She's mentioned in passing that she thinks it would be tedious, that it costs a lot to have a child and things like that. I guess I don't think it has to cost all that much to have a child. Especially not the first year, or the first two years. Sure, a pram's expensive but you get clothes from other people. And diapers...if I work full-time we ought to be able to afford diapers (laughs), you know what I mean? I don't think it's a valid argument, that it's expensive to have a child. God, everybody else has managed it. Why wouldn't we?

Anna (30 years): (...) I mean somehow you always make it. But of course it's an advantage if you're secure, or have everything in order. But I know people who haven't had things in order at all and they make it just fine anyway.

Having highly educated parents was often associated with expectations to complete one's education before family formation. Amanda got pregnant and had an abortion when she was in her second year of medical school. The main reason she had the abortion was that she wanted to complete her studies before having children; partly for economic reasons and partly because she wanted to be able to focus on her studies. Another reason was that she wanted to do things in the "right order", like her parents had done. The "right" sequencing of life events, as she described it, implied first of all completing her education and getting established on the labour market before having children, but also acquiring a certain standard of housing, preferably a single-family home. An extract from Amanda's interview illustrates this emphasis on family background:

Amanda (29 years): This thing with how much I think about how my parents did it, that that's what I base things on, I've just known that that's how I'm going to do it. Both when it comes to the order I'm going to do things in and how old I'm going to be when I do different things. And they did everything really by the book. Met while studying, were together a good number of years, and then they bought a house and had kids and all that (...) I think of my childhood and growing up as really good, and it's so important that it's good, but then intellectually I know that there are a thousand ways that would make it good.

#### *Age and the trade-off between economic security and declining fecundity*

The degree to which economic security and completing one's education were seen as important was, relative to other factors, also largely dependent on age, especially for the female students. Among the younger respondents, economic security was mentioned to a much greater extent. Some of the older respondents described how they had previously intended to complete their education before having children but had now re-evaluated this. Some had also changed their material prerequisites for childbearing as they got older (for similar results on young Polish women, see Mynarska 2009). For many respondents this was associated with the biological risks of postponing childbearing, and several female students mentioned that the increasing difficulty to get pregnant as one gets older made them feel stressed. A common motivation among the older respondents for having children now, rather than waiting until they had completed their education, was that "there is no perfect timing for childbearing":

Beatrice (37 years): I don't think you can buy or acquire 'the perfect life'. There's no perfect time and there's no perfect life and there's no perfect home, and no perfect job. The most important is after all to give children love.

The difficult trade-off between economic security and biology was frequently mentioned. Typical answers were "if it were not (or had not been) for the economic circumstances I would like (or would have liked) to have children before 30", and "if it were not for biological factors I could wait until after 30". Sofia was a clear example of how biology trumps money for women at a certain age; she had five years left in medical school, and if she postponed childbearing until then she would be too old, she argued:

Sofia (30 years): (...) if I knew I didn't have the biological aspect working against me, I would also gladly be able to say that I can finish my studies first and then... but as it is I know that that's not the case and that makes the situation very different. Because I'm not willing to risk, if I'm actually able to have children, I'm not willing to risk waiting until it's too late. Because it's so important to me.

A number of female students also brought up the inevitable biological unfairness between men and women, and some of them told that they had had to inform their partners of the risks of postponement. Male respondents also stated that they did not want to get too old before starting a family, but while women often referred to biological factors and fecundity, several male respondents related the desire to be a young parent to being young enough to play or engage in physical activities, such as football, with their children (see Rijken and Knijn 2009 for similar findings in the Netherlands). Even though the male interviewees were briefer on the subject, and some of them referred to what their girlfriend thought and had said about it, it was evident that the risks of postponement presented an important factor in their childbearing intentions as well. Sebastian, who had a partner five years older than himself, put it like this:

Sebastian (29 years): If it were only up to me. If there weren't any biological factors, then I guess I'd probably wait two years. But I have to take that into, I mean I really want for us to be able to have kids together too, so it's relevant for me too.

## **Non-material preconditions for childbearing**

Previous studies have shown that besides having achieved various concrete or material requirements, young adults today consider it important to have sufficient life experience and personal development before having children. One objective of this study was therefore to determine whether there are any non-material factors related to the student lifestyle that may explain students' low fertility.

### *To have lived life fully*

The data suggest that to have “lived your life fully”, as phrased by Ellen (30 years), before having children was indeed considered important among male as well as female students. Some of the younger students motivated their decision to postpone childbearing with the desire to take part in nightlife, socialize with friends and travel. Among the students in this study, “living your life” as a rule seemed to include travel. As Amanda (29 years) put it: “I don't know anybody who's gone directly from high school [to university], you're supposed to have taken the obligatory trip to Asia first (laughter).” Personal maturity and having developed one's interests first were other factors commonly mentioned. As Sebastian (29 years) described it: “I guess it's been more a curiosity about life and who I am, and who I want to be, that's made me want to explore it without having to think about a child.” Many respondents came from smaller towns in other parts of Sweden, and mentioned how people in their hometowns settle down much earlier. Emily, who comes from a small town in southern Sweden, thought the importance of doing many things before having children might be particularly pronounced in bigger cities:

Emily (25 years): In certain other cities, or in small towns maybe it's more that you should start working as early as possible and get a house and things like that. But in the big cities I think it's a bit more up to each person, but I guess there's quite a lot of focus on self-realization too, I think. You get sort of a, I don't know if status has to do with norms but the way I see it is that you get, that people see it as very positive if you've managed to achieve different things in your life.

### *Having a plan and being in the “right” education*

Many accounts centred on the importance of “having a plan” and knowing what you want to do with your life as preconditions for childbearing. Several informants had previously pursued other educations and described how now being in the “right” education had changed their attitudes



towards having children. Martin (40 years) had a PhD in a natural science subject, but wanted a more meaningful and secure job and was now studying to be a police officer. In the past he had been negative towards having children, but had now begun to reconsider it. One important motive for this was that he felt more secure now, not only emotionally – because he had found the right partner – but most of all regarding work. Even though he was currently a student he knew he would eventually find secure employment, and he felt that this was what he wanted to do. He himself was surprised over the difference it had made. Another respondent, Sebastian, had taken numerous courses at the university before he began his primary school teacher education. When I asked him if there was something he would like to have achieved before having children, he replied:

Sebastian (29 years): A feeling of having a plan for your life, and I think that feels important now, with these studies, even though I have four years to go I know at any rate what I want and that I'm happy with my life. It feels like an important precondition for me to want to have kids, being happy with your life and what you do. Otherwise it would feel wrong to have kids.

Not knowing what to do in life was also mentioned by Linda as one of the main motives behind the abortion she had two years ago. Now that she felt she was on the “right” educational track, and had a better grip on her future prospects, she had become more positive towards having children:

Linda (26 years): (...) it would be easier to have children now while I'm studying. Because then I know what courses I'm taking, at any rate. So you're a bit more prepared and can focus on the child in the beginning, sort of. And not have a bunch of other disturbances, like, because it's quite a big question, this “what am I going to do with my life?”. And it feels like it gets to be too much if you have children too.

### *Mental well-being, student life and social norms*

Being content with life and having “mental health”, as some of the respondents put it, were mentioned by many respondents as essential preconditions for childbearing. Several informants told about having had periods in life when they had been burnt out, anxious or depressed, and for them the most important prerequisite for family formation was “feeling well”. Ellen, for example:

Ellen (30 years): You know I've had periods when I've been depressed, so I really put my own health above everything else, above finances, above everything. And now I feel good, and I think everything else will turn out okay.

Some respondents mentioned a will to focus on one's studies, and to complete one phase in life before entering the next, as reasons for completing one's education before having children. Others brought up the stressful life situation of students, with courses to be completed and essays to be written, combined with the need to work extra to make ends meet. Jakob put it this way:

Jakob (30 years): I think the purely financial aspect of being a student isn't the big problem, I think it's rather the fact that you're a student. I mean, that you have so very much to do, it's not like a job where you go home and can be "off" – when you're going to school you're never off.

However, several respondents pointed out that there are also benefits to having children as a student, such as being more flexible and autonomous as well as having more time. The following quotation is an example of this reasoning:

Cecilia (25 years): Yeah, you have pretty flexible hours overall, in any case for me there have been very few obligatory parts. So I figure that's an advantage, above all after the actual parental leave I'm thinking, then maybe you don't have to feel the pressure to leave work early to pick up at day care and maybe you're finished with your lectures in good time to do it. I think it would be rather nice to have kids now, because right now I'm more autonomous.

However, regardless of their own intentions, all respondents agreed that having children while still in education is not stigmatised or odd in any way, at least not if you have reached a socially accepted age. Many respondents mentioned someone they knew who had a child while in education, or fellow students who had children, to underline that there is nothing strange or unusual about it. Emily reflected over the social norms regarding education and childbearing the following way:

Emily (25 years): I don't think anybody in my closest circle of friends would have children before finishing their studies. They would probably choose to do it afterwards. On the other hand I don't think it would be a huge stigma for somebody if they had kids before that, but I think everybody expects you to have your career and all that before the kids.

## **Parental leave and gender roles**

One aim of the study at hand was to explore whether students' low fertility may be related to the design of the Swedish parental leave system. Another aim was to investigate whether the stronger negative effect of women's enrolment on childbearing propensities could be related to mothers' longer parental leave or whether there are other explanations for this asymmetry, such as gendered expectations and attitudes regarding parental responsibilities and roles.

### *Knowledge about, and significance attributed to, the parental leave system*

Somewhat surprisingly, many students had only a vague idea about the parental leave insurance being based on one's income before having children and few knew the details. However, there was great variation in this regard. In general, the male students seemed to have less knowledge about the parental leave system. This was also the case among some who stated that they would like to have children before completing their education. Jakob (30 years), for example, wanted to have children now but did not know much about the parental leave system, instead counting on his girlfriend to find out the details when the time came. Another respondent, David (32 years), would soon become a father and spoke of how his girlfriend had recently completed her degree in social work and had worked hard in order to receive a higher parental leave benefit. David himself had not looked into what benefit he was entitled to, but was rather sure it would be based on his previous income.

With one exception – Thomas (28 years), who was active in the students' union – mainly female respondents had detailed knowledge about the parental leave insurance system. For some of these female students, parental leave and the benefit level were important factors in their childbearing intentions. Anna (30 years) and Klara (29 years), for example, had chosen to take study loans only to get a parental leave benefit based on their previous income, in case they got pregnant.<sup>11</sup> Even though Klara was not even sure she actually wanted to have children, she had chosen to take study loans in order to receive a higher parental leave benefit *if* she decided she would like to have a child. For the female respondents who knew they were only entitled to the low flat-rate benefit, age was (again) a crucial factor for the significance they attributed to this. For Cecilia (25 years), this was one of the reasons she intended to postpone childbearing:

Cecilia (25 years): Yeah, I mean I think about the fact that the parental benefit would be super low if I had a kid now while I'm studying or right after I've finished my studies (...) I actually had no idea the parental benefit was so low, I thought it would be based on everywhere I'd worked earlier, but then I found out it's done in completely different ways and then I started thinking differently about children.

Sofia (30 years), on the other hand, did not want to postpone childbearing until she had completed her education and could attain a higher parental leave benefit. Her account is another example of the trade-off between economics and biology:

Sofia (30 years): If I were 25 maybe, then maybe I'd be able to say that those things [the parental benefit] would make me wait to have children, even if I wanted to, till after I had finished my studies. But now I don't think, it's like an external factor that doesn't have that much significance.

#### *The division of parental leave and gendered expectations*

When respondents were asked how they thought they would share parental leave if they had children, the standard response was "equally". However, this answer must be seen against the background of the strong gender equality norm in Sweden, whereby dividing the unpaid work as well as the parental leave equally is the politically correct way to go. It can also be explained by questions about parental leave being very hypothetical to most respondents. Alsarve and Boye (2012) found that among some couples today, dividing parental leave equally has become such an obvious principle it is hardly a matter of negotiation. This was also the case in this study as many respondents, both male and female, declared that they assumed they would divide the leave equally, even though they had not discussed this with their partner. Several respondents also referred to the debate about the division of parental leave in politics and media, and it was evident that they perceived that dividing the leave equally is a strong social norm. Several female students stated that they would be embarrassed if their partner did not take parental leave:

Sofia (30 years): I would think it was embarrassing if my boyfriend didn't want to stay home. I mean, besides making us argue I would be ashamed in front of others, because a good father should be there and be interested at an early stage, even when the child is little, and maybe give up his career a bit and make the same sacrifices.

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<sup>11</sup> A student who has worked at least 240 days before entering education may be entitled to a parental leave benefit based on the previous income if the student takes full-time student financial aid.

However, even if the first response to the question on how they thought they would share parental leave was consistently “equally”, follow-up questions revealed that among some, one of them would probably take a larger share. A common motivation for this was their or their partners’ work situation. Some also mentioned breastfeeding as a reason for why the mother may take a slightly larger share of the parental leave. One female respondent, who initially answered that she and her partner would share the leave equally, later in the interview expressed worries that her partner, at the end of the day, would not be willing to take his share of the leave. A few respondents preferred a traditional division of parental leave, in which the mother takes most of it. Miriam (26 years), for example, looked forward to being on parental leave: “I’m probably the one who’ll stay home with the child, the children. I don’t feel like [name] needs to be home in that case. I guess I’m a bit traditional there.” While Miriam motivated her intention to take the largest part of the leave with her desire to do so, Robin (32 years) argued that small children feel more secure with their mothers and it is therefore natural for the mother to take most of the leave. But he stressed that that he felt it was “great” that fathers also have the possibility to be on parental leave. The fact that Robin used the term *possibility* illustrates how parental leave, for some men, is still regarded as something a father can choose to take if he wants to. Miriam, on the other hand, regarded the parental leave as something the mother can decide whether or not she wants to share.

It should be stressed, however, that the traditional views the cases above exemplify did not follow the general pattern. The main impression of the accounts is that males and females alike were very gender-equal or “non-traditional” in their attitudes and intentions as regards family formation and parental responsibilities. Both male and female respondents described a “good father” as an active and present father, an ideal well in accordance with the “new father” discourse. Several of the male respondents may be described as non-career-oriented or family-oriented, and some of them stated that they would gladly take more than half of the parental leave. Jakob (30 years) said that his future ambition is to work part-time: “there’s so much more to life than work”. John (27 years) described his partner as much more career-oriented than him, and for this reason they had talked about her working more while he would take greater responsibility for home and children: “If I think about myself I’m always going to put the family before my own career, I believe, I hope”, he declared. A couple of the female respondents had partners who were more interested in having children now than they were. Caroline (25 years),

for example, wanted to complete her education before having children but her partner, who was five years older, wanted to have children now. To convince her to go along with this, he had stated that he would take half of the parental leave. Klara was not sure she wanted to have children at all as she valued her own time and freedom too highly, but her partner really wanted to have children:

Klara (29 years): (...) when he said “I’m at home, we can have kids and you can do what you want and I can stay home”, he offered to stay home. But it was also indirectly a requirement of mine, because otherwise I didn’t want to at all. When he said that the issue was put in a completely different light.

## **Concluding discussion**

The overall aim of this study was to examine students’ childbearing intentions and the motivations behind them, and to seek potential explanations for why so few students have children while enrolled in education. The results suggest that the postponement of childbearing until completion of education is above all a question of economic security. This applies to both male and female students. In many cases, the degree to which economic security was stressed by the respondents was related to family background and the economic circumstances under which they themselves had grown up. In general, having experienced economic difficulties during childhood seems to make economic security a more important precondition, but the association with socioeconomic class that this suggests is complex. While some accounts indicated that those with highly educated parents felt more pressure to complete their education before having children, coming from a family that is economically well off likely increases the chances of receiving economic support from parents *if* one has children while still enrolled. Even though parents as a potential economic back-up were mentioned explicitly by only two respondents, a previous survey points towards about 25 per cent of students receiving financial support from parents (Statistics Sweden 2007), indicating that socioeconomic background may to some extent structure young adults’ economic possibilities to have children while still enrolled in education.

However, even if economic security was an important factor in many respondents’ childbearing intentions, some respondents de-emphasized the significance of material factors and reasoned that “things always work out in one way or another”. For some students, this feeling of security was

based on their long-term prospects rather than their current economic situation. Still, it is likely that this kind of reasoning and general “sense of security” – even without current individual job security – is more common in a welfare state with a well-developed social security net like Sweden than in other societies. This way of thinking, and the fact that many respondents were rather ignorant of the details of the parental leave system, is well in line with Ellingsaeter and Pedersen’s (2013) findings in Norway. In this view, a lack of explicit considerations about the policy system should not be interpreted as family policies being insignificant. Rather, due to a high degree of “institutional trust”, family policies and their benefits are something that is largely taken for granted. Cross-national comparative research could offer further insight into whether this phenomenon is specific to the Nordic countries.

Furthermore, the respondents’ answers clearly indicate that the importance of economic security and having completed education declines with age as one’s biological clock ticks away. The younger respondents expressed stronger ideas about what life should be like before having children and in what order they wanted to do things in life; they intended to complete their studies and establish themselves on the labour market before starting a family. This finding is in accordance with my previous quantitative study, which showed that the effects of enrolment on female childbearing risks strongly vary by age (Thalberg 2011). Age and the biological risks of postponement also arose as central themes in many students’ childbearing intentions, especially among the female respondents. The fact that both economic security and declining fecundity were crucial factors in the respondents’ childbearing intentions implies that some students, particularly females around 30, find themselves in a difficult situation, given that these two factors normally work in opposite directions time-wise.

Another finding, which is well in keeping with previous research, is the importance of “having done other things”, such as travels, before having children. Having experienced many things in life, even outside the realm of work and education, is seen as positive and as something that increases one’s social status. Other factors that were emphasized are knowing what you want to do with your life and having a sense of direction in terms of career. Experiencing that one is on the right track in terms of education increases one’s feeling of security as well the inclination to have children. The high degree of uncertainty that characterizes life for many students may thus be another important explanation for students’ low fertility. Mental and emotional well-being was also frequently mentioned as an important prerequisite for childbearing. One may speculate that

this emphasis on well-being is a reflection of a society in which self-realization and being successful have become increasingly important. In addition, the development of social media has made it possible to compare one's life and circumstances to others' on a daily basis, to a much larger extent than was previously possible. This pronounced weight attached to well-being may also be related to the increasing psychological illness among young adults in recent years (The National Board of Health and Welfare 2013). Numerous studies have investigated how having children influences parents' subjective well-being (Aasve et al. 2012; Baranowska and Matysiak 2011; Gähler and Rudolphi 2004; Kohler et al. 2005; Margolis and Myrskylä 2011; Myrskylä 2012). The results of this study suggest that the association between happiness and childbirth may also work in the opposite direction. The fact that mental well-being, as well as the knowledge of one's intent and purpose in life, were frequently brought up and emphasized by the respondents in this study indicates that these non-material aspects may be important additions to the basic requirements for childbearing listed by Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995).

On most issues, male and female students reasoned along very similar lines. The absence of great gender differences may possibly be associated with the Swedish dual-earner/dual-carer model and high degree of gender equality. Perhaps societies with a more traditional division of labour would show greater gender differences as regards childbearing attitudes and intentions. One clear gender difference, however, was that female students generally had much more knowledge about the parental leave insurance system than men, and they also took into account and planned for their benefit level to a much greater extent. That women generally have greater knowledge than men about the parental leave system is well in line with results from a survey carried out by the National Social Insurance Board (2003). This finding also lends additional support to the suggested existence of a gap between the strong gender equality norm and actual behaviour. Further, it strengthens the hypothesis that the low fertility of student mothers found in my previous study (Thalberg 2012) is related to mothers' longer and "less optional" parental leave. As regards the relatively high fertility of student fathers, the accounts indicate that this too, at least partly, may be explained by gendered expectations. In the interviews, a "good father" was described as an active and present father rather than a breadwinner, a role that can presumably be relatively easily combined with studies, considering that studies are often less time-consuming and more flexible than employment. In this way, the accounts of this study are in line with previous studies suggesting a changing nature and meaning of fatherhood. Another gender difference was that female respondents to a somewhat higher degree emphasized economic



independence. This observation is also in accordance with previous research, which finds that economic independence is a more important issue for women than for men, which may be related to men to a greater extent taking independence for granted (Halleröd and Nyman 2008). If women are less willing to depend on a partner economically, this could be another possible explanation for why the negative effect of enrolment on childbearing is stronger for women than for men.

The qualitative accounts of this study have deepened our knowledge of the prerequisites for childbearing and presented some potential explanations for the low fertility among students and the gendered effect of enrolment on childbearing. In addition, the results have generated hypotheses about the preconditions for family formation that would benefit from quantitative examination. This concerns, for example, the influence of family background on the relative aspiration to achieve economic security, something that could add to the literature on the impact of socioeconomic class on family formation. Another suggestion for future research is to take into consideration non-material aspects, such as mental and emotional well-being and the knowledge of one's intent and purpose in life, to a greater extent when investigating childbearing behaviour and the postponement of childbearing.

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## **Appendices**

### **Appendix I. Interview guide**

#### ***Facts/Background***

- Gender
- Age
- Place of upbringing
- Current studies, subject; university/college; full-time
- Previous experiences, studies/work/other
- Study loans/grants; part-time work; earnings; other incomes
- Partner's age and main occupation
- Been a couple for how long? Live together? For how long?
- Kind of housing? Number of rooms?

#### ***Family formation***

- Would you like to have children in the future?
- Do you know whether you are able to have children?
- How old were your parents when they had children?
  - Has this affected how you think about the timing of childbearing?
  - Do your parents have any tertiary education?
- Do many of your friends have children?
  - Has this affected your attitudes towards having children?
- Have you and your partner talked about having children?
  - (If yes) How did you reason when you talked about having children?
  - (If no) What do *you* think about having children?

#### ***Preconditions for childbearing and the sequencing of life events***

- Is there anything that you think is important to have achieved before you have children?
  - Education?
  - Employment/income?
  - Housing?



- If you think about different events traditionally associated with “becoming an adult”, such as completing one’s education, finding a job or having children, do you think there is a societal norm that says you should do these things in a particular order?
  - Is it important to you to do things in a particular order?

### ***Family policy, parental leave and division of labour***

- Do family policies have any significance for your childbearing plans?
- Is taking parental leave important to you?
- How long do you think you would like to be on parental leave?
- Have you and your partner talked about how you would divide the parental leave between the two of you if you had children?
- How do you share the housework between the two of you today?
- Have you and your partner talked about how you would share responsibilities for children, the household and economic provision if you had children?
- In your opinion, are there different expectations on mothers and fathers nowadays?

### ***The ideal age for having children***

- If you try to disregard material factors such as money, housing etc., what would be the ideal age for you to have children?
  - (if younger than ideal age) Do you think you will have children at that age?  
Why?
  - (if older than ideal age) Why did you not have children at that age?
- Are you worried that postponing childbearing will make it more difficult to conceive?

### ***Wrapping up***

- Is there anything we have not talked about that you would like to add?



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# Vill du vara med i en intervjustudie?

Är du heltidsstuderande (minst 75 procent), är 25 år eller äldre, har en stadigvarande partner (helst sambo) men ännu inga barn, och kan tänka dig att dela med dig av dina tankar kring familjebildning? Då kan du vara den vi söker!

Intervjuerna tar max 1 timme och äger rum på Stockholms universitet, Institutet för Framtidsstudier (Drottninggatan) eller annan lämplig plats om så önskas. Resultaten kommer att vara en del av en doktorsavhandling i sociologi. Dina svar är givetvis anonyma.

Som tack får du en biobiljett!

Låter detta intressant? Hör av dig till Sara Thalberg  
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# MÄN SÖKES till intervjustudie

Är du man och heltidsstuderande (minst 75 procent), 25 år eller äldre, har en stadigvarande partner (helst sambo) men ännu inga barn, och kan tänka dig att dela med dig av dina tankar kring familjebildning? Då kan du vara den vi söker!

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