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A wonderful experience or a frightening commitment? An exploration of men's reasons to (not) have children

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Abstract Research on reproductive decision-making mainly focuses on women's experiences and desire for children. Men included in this type of research usually represent one-half of a heterosexual couple and/or men who are involuntarily childless. Perspectives from a broader group of men are lacking. This study is based on the results of a baseline questionnaire answered by 191 men aged 20–50 years who attended two sexual health clinics in two major Swedish cities. The questionnaire included questions about sociodemographic background, reproductive history and fertility, but also two open-ended questions focusing on reasons for having or not having children. The results of these two questions were analysed by manifest content analysis and resulted in five categories: '(non-)ideal images', 'to pass something on', 'personal development and self-image', 'the relationship with the (potential) co-parent' and 'practical circumstances and prerequisites'. Reasons for having children were mainly based on ideal images of children, family and parenthood. Meanwhile, reasons for not having children usually concerned practical issues. The type of answer given was related to men's procreative intentions but not to background characteristics. In conclusion, men raised many different aspects for and against having children. Therefore, reproductive decision-making should not be considered a non-choice among men.

KEYWORDS: reproductive decision-making, men, parenthood

Background

In most Western countries, there have been trends of declining fertility and postponed parenthood in recent decades. As a result, medical researchers have shown an increased interest in people's fertility awareness and reproductive intentions. Studies demonstrate that people usually express desire to have two or three children in their lives and to become parents

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in their 30s (Daniluk and Koert, 2012; Ekelin et al., 2012; Hammarberg et al., 2016, 2017a; Mortensen et al., 2012; Pedro et al., 2018; Peterson et al., 2012; Sabarre et al., 2013; Sørensen et al., 2016; Vassard et al., 2016). However, many people seem to have limited knowledge about fertility, even when highly educated, and therefore interventions have been put in place to raise people's fertility awareness (e.g. Bayoumi et al., 2018; Hammarberg et al., 2017b; Wojcieszek and Thompson, 2013).

The trend of declining fertility rates is not only a question of individuals' medical knowledge and reproductive health. From a sociological perspective, the trend is commonly regarded as a consequence of women's increased participation in higher education and the labour force, as well as more unstable relationship patterns and precarious work situations (Mills et al., 2011). There have also been changes in the views and value of family and children. Due to increased individualization, people rely more on public institutions than the family to provide security (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Childbearing decisions are increasingly influenced by the social, psychological and emotional value of children, and less by the economic value (Holland and Keizer, 2015), which has resulted in smaller families in recent years. Hence, the number of children one will eventually have and at what time in life depends not only on biology, but also, to a large extent, on socio-economic and cultural factors (Dahlberg, 2015).

What is seldom asked is why people want children in the first place, although this information is valuable to better understand fertility patterns and people's pregnancy planning behaviour. As highlighted by Overall and Caplan (2012), no reasons seem to be required to have children in contemporary Western cultures. The pronatal normative is deeply embedded into sociocultural structures (Hadley, 2018), and parenthood is constructed as an inevitable and passive decision among heterosexual couples (Lupton and Barclay, 1997; Morison, 2013). Childlessness, on the other hand, frequently becomes questioned, and people without children are assumed to be infertile, overly self-centred or expected to eventually change their minds (Overall and Caplan, 2012). There are some indications that the discussions around voluntary childlessness are changing. From having been described as something deviant and pathological in the 1970s literature, nowadays, voluntary childlessness is more often regarded as an act of resistance towards restrictive heteronormative ideals (Blackstone and Stewart, 2012). Still, the pronatal normative is a strong narrative which influences research on human reproduction. Morison (2013) argues that the view of parenthood as a predefined stage of the heterosexual life course contributes to a 'heteronormative blind-spot' in reproductive research.

Studies concerning procreative intentions have mainly focused on women and heterosexual couples. There are few studies that focus solely on men's perspectives and, as highlighted by Morison (2013), those that exist centre around men who cannot procreate without reproductive technology (e.g. infertile men, gay men) or men who are considered unfit to parent (e.g. teenage men, HIV-positive men). The views of other men (read: heterosexual, fertile, healthy and at a culturally appropriate age to father) are overlooked in research, as well as in medial representations (Peterson, 2014).

According to an international fertility decision-making study, women generally displayed stronger desire for children than men (Boivin et al., 2018). However, the perceived need for children also varied between countries. This exemplifies how expectations on women's and men's engagement in the reproductive sphere are also bound to time and space.

This study is based on Swedish data. According to sociologist Gøsta Esping-Andersen (2016), 'the family' is regaining importance in the Scandinavian countries, and fertility rates are higher and more stable than in many other European countries. Esping-Andersen connects this to success in adapting the society to the new economic role of women. The welfare system offers paid parental leave to all parents, free child health care and subsidized preschools, which makes the country a 'child-friendly' society (Peterson and Engwall, 2016). These political efforts also encourage women and men to share child and household tasks equally, which has contributed to creating a hegemonic ideal of 'the new gender equal Swedish father' (Johansson and Klinth, 2008). This ideal has not only been described as a discursive resource for Swedish men to assume more active responsibility in all areas of everyday family life (Bergman and Hobson, 2002; Plantin, 2015), but also used to promote Sweden abroad (Björk, 2017). The ideal around 'the new Swedish father' has thus emerged as a hegemonic masculinity, often defined against the traditional, dominant and patriarchal masculinity.

Consequently, voluntarily childless men are rarely represented in the media (Peterson, 2014). Still, one out of five men in Sweden do not have children at the age of 50 years, and childlessness is most common among men with a low level of education and low income (Boschini and Sundström, 2018). It is mainly the higher educated, also described as 'the forerunners in the process of value change' (Esping-Andersen, 2016, p. 30), who previously preferred smaller families that have now started having larger families. However, parallel to the pronatalist narratives in society, a social debate is ongoing on whether it is ethically justifiable to bring new life to earth, considering overpopulation and climate change. Hence, there are obviously many different social factors influencing people's decisions to have children.

Why (not) children?

To summarize the existing literature on men's reasons to have children, achieving family unity is emerging as a powerful ideal, and there are high, if not miraculous, expectations of what the birth of a child can accomplish. Parenthood has been described, by older involuntarily childless men in the UK, as a an integral part of the lifecourse trajectory (Hadley, 2018). Men viewed parenthood as a central experience of human life, and longed for the unconditional love that comes with a child. Similarly, homosexual men opting for adoption in the USA exclaimed their love of children and beliefs of parenthood as a natural desire (Goldberg et al., 2012). Men expressed a wish to shape a child, and regarded parenthood as psychologically and personally fulfilling. Their views of parenthood were often related to their own upbringing and family ties.

Studies from the Nordic context are few, but show similar results. Sylvest et al. (2018) interviewed heterosexual men recruited at a Danish clinic for fertility counselling, and found that men wanted children to gain a greater sense of

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meaning in life, to make their relationship more complete and to have someone to guide into the future. Similarly, Sørensen et al. (2016) found that Danish college students expected that parenthood would develop them as people, strengthen the relationship with their partner and create new interests in life. Moreover, Bergnéhr (2008), Eriksson et al. (2012) and Lundqvist and Roman (2003) found that Swedish men (and women) wanted children because it was a normal thing to do, a biologically contingent desire and inner drive to pass on one's heritage. Also, in their studies, raising a child in a nuclear family with a loving partner was considered a crucial, and socially normative, part of life.

On the downside, parenthood is expected to mean less freedom and less time for personal interests. The importance of other life goals and interests, aversion to lifestyle changes and wish for spontaneous mobility are some of the most common reasons given not to have children (Agrillo and Nelini, 2008; Blackstone and Stewart, 2012; Buhr and Huinink, 2017; Statistics Sweden, 2009). Furthermore, reproductive decision-making appears to be related to personality traits, and voluntarily childless people have been measured as more politically liberal, less religious and to value independence more highly (Avison and Furnham, 2015). Childlessness has also been related to sociodemographic determinants such as age, education and employment, although they are expressed differently in different countries. A study from the USA found that voluntary childlessness was more common among higher educated women but not higher educated men (Waren and Pals, 2013). Furthermore, childless men in Italy were more likely to intend to remain childless if they were unemployed (Fiori et al., 2017). In a study from Sweden, people aged 36–40 years were likely to be childless because of fertility problems or not having found the right partner, rather than having an insecure financial situation (Schytt et al., 2014). Hence, the reasons why people have not yet become parents are related to gender, age and family situation (Statistics Sweden, 2009). In these cases, it is a unclear whether childlessness should be regarded as voluntary or involuntary. Interestingly, according to a study with childless Swedish men, childlessness rarely turned out to be an active decision (Engwall and Peterson, 2010, Chapter 9). Having children simply did not feel relevant to these men as life was good as the status quo (Park, 2005).

As mentioned previously, most studies on men's reproductive decision-making from Western countries have included a smaller sample of middle-aged men who were either homosexual, involuntarily childless or in a steady heterosexual relationship. Against this background, the aim of the present study was to explore reasons to have children from a broader group of adult men. Furthermore, the authors wanted to find out whether the reasons for having children or not having children were related to sociodemographic characteristics, relationship status, and reproductive history and intentions.

Methods

This study is based on data derived from an intervention study with men, conducted between October 2014 and February 2016. The intervention consisted of reproductive-life-plan-based counselling, with the aim of increasing men's fertility awareness. The study procedure has been described in detail previously by Bodin et al. (2018). The work was undertaken in accordance with the Code of Ethics of the World Medical Association (Declaration of Helsinki), and the study was approved by the Regional Ethical Review Board in Uppsala.

Men aged 18–50 years who attended two sexual health clinics in two major Swedish cities were invited to participate in the study. Of the 663 eligible men approached, 229 agreed to participate; ultimately, 201 men participated in the study. These men responded to a baseline questionnaire including questions about sociodemographic background, reproductive history and fertility. The qualitative data analysed in this paper are based on two open-ended questions from the baseline questionnaire:

(1) For what reasons do you want (more) children?
(2) For what reasons do you not want (more) children?

Of the 201 participants, 191 men answered one or both open-ended questions. Question 1 was answered by 173 men and Question 2 was answered by 112 men.

Most participants attended the clinics during drop-in hours to test for sexually transmitted infections (STIs), and they filled out the baseline questionnaire while waiting for their appointment. Hence, some men only had a few minutes to spare while others were in the waiting room for more than 1 h. The answers given were usually short and not longer than a sentence, although a few men wrote two or three sentences. The answers were analysed by manifest content analysis, as described by Graneheim and Lundman (2004). After having read the answers several times, they were divided into meaning units, and thereafter abstracted and labelled with a code. The codes were compared and sorted into subcategories and then categories.

When the categories had been constructed, Chi-squared test was used to measure if the categories were differently distributed between groups based on background variables. The variables used were age ($\leq$25, 25–29, 30–34, 35–39, $\geq$40 years), level of completed education (elementary school, high school, university), country of birth (Sweden, other European country, Non-European country), sexual orientation (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual), relationship status (steady romantic relationship, single), and wish to have children in the future (yes, unsure, no). Among those who wanted children in the future, a new variable was constructed based on the wish to have children within 2 years or later in life. $P \leq .05$ was considered to indicate statistical significance. Statistical analyses were performed using SPSS Version 25 (IBM Corp., Armonk, NY, USA).

Results

Characteristics of participants are shown in Table 1. Among the 191 participants, 65 (34%) had ever been involved in a conception, but only 21 (11%) had become fathers. One participant had experienced fertility problems. The mean age of participants was 28 years (range 20–50 years), although the mean ages of fathers and non-fathers were 39 and 27 years, respectively. The majority of men (72%) wanted to have children in the future, and one-fifth wanted a child within 2 years. It was most common to want two children, although

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Table 1 Background characteristics of the 191 participants.

Age (years), mean (min–max)	28.4 (20–50)
	n (%)
Education (highest completed)	
Elementary school	7 (4)
High school	93 (49)
University	91 (47)
Country of birth	
Sweden	160 (84)
Other European	13 (7)
Non-European	17 (9)
Missing	1 (0)
Sexual orientation	
Heterosexual	173 (90)
Homosexual	11 (6)
Bisexual	7 (4)
Other	0 (0)
Relationship status	
Steady romantic relationship	74 (39)
Single	114 (60)
Missing	3 (1)
Fathers	21 (11)
Wish to have children in the future	
Yes	138 (72)
Unsure	29 (15)
No	24 (13)

answers ranged from one to five. Almost 13% of participants did not want children in the future and 15% were unsure. The wish to father was not related to level of education, country of birth, sexual orientation or relationship status. However, fathers were less likely than non-fathers to want a child in the future (33% versus 77%, $P > .001$). Willingness to have children sooner (within 2 years) than later increased with age, from only 6% of men aged <25 years to 67% of men aged >35 years ($P > .001$).

The qualitative analysis of the answers in the open-ended questions resulted in five categories: '(non-)ideal images', 'to pass something on', 'personal development and self-image', 'the relationship with the (potential) co-parent' and 'practical circumstances and prerequisites'. Many men gave reasons involving several categories. Thus, the categories should not be interpreted as mutually exclusive.

(Non-)ideal images

Several answers displayed an ideal of and longing for children, parenthood and family, and the joy and unconditional love it was assumed to bring. Having children was regarded as a pinnacle of life, but also as something bringing meaning to life, and something to focus on during the latter half of life and rejoice when getting old:

> I can't really explain, [I] have a longing to create a family and the loving relationship that procreation entails (22 years old, in a steady relationship with a man).
>
> I think it is the greatest and best event that can happen to a person (20 years old, in a steady relationship with a woman).

Men described children as 'wonderful', 'cute', 'funny', 'nice' and as something they 'liked'. Family was described in similar terms, and something 'one wants' and something that generates happiness. It was also suggested that having children is something no one regrets. Rather, it would bring more love to their lives, love that was described as 'without demands' or 'unconditional':

> To be a parent and to love a child so heartily as one (hopefully) does with one's children would probably for me be the most amazing thing in life, so that is something I don't want to miss (22 years old, heterosexual, single).

Some men wanted children simply because they regarded themselves as 'family persons' or 'potentially a good father', and someone who could 'have a lot to give to a child'. There were also men who already had children but had separated from their partner and longed for a 'new' or a 'real' family.

On the other hand, a negative view of children could be a reason not to have children. Some men argued that children were egocentric and difficult to handle. One man said he would refrain from parenthood partly because, as he wrote, 'the kid might be a shitty human'. Having doubts about becoming a good father could be another reason to abstain, as parenthood was expected to be distressing and demanding. Men expressed that they did not 'have it in themselves' to be a father, that other people fit more to be a parent or that they were not a 'daddy-type'. Also, having enough problems of one's own or being too old were seen as reasons not to have (more) children, since being an active parent was viewed as a requirement.

Related to this, almost one out of six men reasoned around the number of children they wanted to have. The vast majority expressed that a child should have at least one sibling. Many men referred to their own upbringing and either described the happiness of having siblings or the loneliness of being the single child in the family:

> I have gotten a lot out of having two older siblings; single children have greater expectations and demands on themselves from the parents and less opportunity to develop their own identity/personality (24 years old, heterosexual, single).

Siblings were described as an important part of life since siblings always have someone by their side and someone to play with. They learn from each other how to become social and the elder child can be a role model for the younger:

> I find that a sibling relationship gives a perspective to both children where they have to look from another's position and find a compromise (28 years old, in a steady relationship with a woman).

Two children, or maybe three, was usually considered as a preferable number. More than that would be too demanding and also not good for the planet. Other reasons not to have more children were financial and time constraints. It was stated that one should not have more children than one could handle in a satisfactory manner.

To pass something on

One of the most common reasons to want children was a wish to pass something on to the next generation; in other words,

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to move the family forward and leave a 'trail in the sand'. It was usually genes that were mentioned, but also social heritage. Men wanted children in order to have a mini version of themselves and be mirrored in another being:

> [I want children] to be able to hand over what I have/will have created in my life to someone, and to pass on the heritage line […] (26 years old, heterosexual, single).
> [I want] a small version of myself that I get to raise and hopefully bring good values to (32 years old, heterosexual, single).

On the other hand, genes could be a reason not to have children because of the risk of passing on heritable diseases. There was also awareness among some men that their partner, the birth mother, could be too old or sick to have children safely.

To have children was referred to as a biological impetus, the meaning of life and a natural step forward. As one man wrote, 'life has its phases, being a parent is one of them'. However, there were some who argued against this by referring to overpopulation, climate change, wars and a bleak future. They believed that there are already too many people and orphaned children on earth. Bringing new life to the world was described as irresponsible, unethical and sick:

> The future in our world does not look too good, sometimes I wonder if it is ethical to add a new life that must deal with problems we created (28 years old, in a steady relationship with a woman).

Some men would not mind adopting instead of having biological children, and others found that spending time with nephews, nieces or stepchildren was sufficient for them.

Personal development and self-image

Related to the wish to pass something on, there were men who wanted to have someone to care for as they believed that that responsibility would make them grow as people and enrich their lives:

> I think it enriches and develops you as a human being (30 years old, in a steady relationship with a woman).

Having children was also described as the ultimate sign of devotion to someone else other than oneself. A 44-year-old man who became a father at 39 years of age re-inforced this view by writing:

> Children changed my life for the better. I was no longer in the centre, which was good for me.

However, it was more common that childless men (but also one of the fathers) regarded children as a threat to personal development. These men did not feel ready for the responsibility of becoming a parent, and saw it as something that stole time and energy from their other ambitions in life. They worried about loss of freedom, autonomy and flexibility:

> It takes time, energy and resources, and my own needs are completely subjugated to someone else. Even interests are suffering (25 years old, in a steady relationship with a woman).
> I feel that this is a major obstacle for many of my life goals and ambitions. I am not fully sold on the idea of tying myself up for the rest of my life with the responsibility of paternity (26 years old, in a sexual, non-romantic relationship with a woman).

Having children was also viewed by some as too mentally stressful, creating feelings of performance anxiety. One man described having children as a vital but frightening commitment.

The relationship with the (potential) co-parent

Another reason to have children was to create life with someone you love, and share the parental experience. It was assumed to bring happiness and strength to the relationship, as well as a common future:

> [Having children] seems to be the ultimate thing to share with a person you love (25 years old, heterosexual, no serious relationship).

Some were still waiting to find the right partner with whom to have children. The right partner should be a good mother and someone you want to share the rest of your life with. A loveless and unstable relationship was considered a reason to avoid parenthood:

> [A reason not to have children is a] bad relationship. Conditions MUST be right, i.e. the right partner, otherwise it is just selfish to have children (28 years old, heterosexual, single).

The importance of the relationship could also outweigh the unwillingness to procreate. One man wrote that he would have children only if it was important to his partner, as an action to save the relationship.

Practical circumstances and prerequisites

The other prerequisites for parenthood (beyond having found the right partner) were time, money and to feel emotionally ready. These aspects were often related to each other, and without these fulfilments, conditions for parenthood would not be right:

> [I am] not financially or emotionally stable enough yet, not adult enough to have responsibility for a small life yet (22 years old, in a steady relationship with a man).
> You have to be able to take care of your family (35 years old, in a steady relationship with a woman).
> If I don't have time/money I would probably wait until the child has a safe future (20 years old, in a steady relationship with a woman).

The work situation was important in various ways. Not having a secure job could imply difficulties planning for a child. Hence, having money would enable men to give the child a worthy upbringing and to find secure housing, suitable for a family. On the other hand, working too much was not good either as it would hinder men from becoming involved fathers.

Intentions and reasons in relation to participant characteristics

Having children

Most reasons to have children were found within the category of ideal images (51%), and thereafter about passing

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something on (22%), the relationship with the (potential) co-parent (12%), and personal development and self-image (8%). It was very uncommon to mention practical circumstances and prerequisites (2%). Men who were unsure about having children more often weighted in something about the relationship in their answer (27% versus 9% of those who wanted children and 11% of those who did not, $P = .030$). There was no difference in reasoning in relation to background characteristics, but a tendency that men aged ≥40 years were more likely than younger men to mention the partner ($P = .063$).

Not having children

Reasons not to have children were most commonly related to practical circumstances and prerequisites (41%), followed by non-ideal images (24%), personal development and self-image (24%), to pass something on (19%), and, least commonly, the relationship with the co-parent (17%). A majority of men who wanted children viewed practical issues (such as lack of time and money) as the largest obstacle towards having children. On the other hand, men who did not want children most often mentioned reluctance towards passing something on (because of, for example, overpopulation) and non-ideal images of the child, parenthood or family life (e.g. disliking children, not being a 'daddy-type'). To those who were unsure, practical issues and personal development (e.g. loss of freedom) were clearly the major reasons to doubt. There was also a tendency that the older the men were, the more likely they were to mention the relationship as an obstacle.

There were few differences between men in steady relationships and single men, as well as between men who wanted children sooner or later in life. Single men were more concerned about passing something on than men in stable relationships (28% versus 10%, $P = .039$). Men who wanted children within 2 years mentioned the relationship with the (potential) co-parent as a reason not to have children more often than men who wanted children later (40% versus 14%, $P = .045$). There was a tendency that men who wanted children later worried more about personal development than men who wanted children sooner (28% versus 0%, $P = .058$).

Discussion

This study challenged the idea that having children is a non-choice among (presumably) fertile men at different ages and in different life stages by asking them for reasons for and against having children. Although there were some who could or would not motivate their wish to (not) have children, a majority gave one or several reasons. The results show that there is variation in men's motivations to have children, and that the decision is often multi-layered; this confirms findings from previous studies on men's reproductive decision-making (Bergnéhr, 2008; Goldberg et al., 2012; Hadley, 2018; Lundqvist and Roman, 2003; Peterson and Jenni, 2003; Sørensen et al., 2016; Sylvest et al., 2018). The reasons to have children often reflected a dream of what procreation could give men (love, personal development), but also what men had to offer as fathers. There was great hope for what a child would bring, not only for the individual but also for the romantic relationship and society. However, while many men viewed parenthood as development, others viewed parenthood as a hindrance to personal development.

The wish to pass something on and care for others could reflect the individual's concern for generativity. Generativity is a psychological term meaning the readiness to invest resources in offspring and to guide future generations (Bornstein, 2018). The readiness is based on the desire to relate to and be needed by others, as well as the need for symbolic immortality. Generativity can be, but is not necessarily, accomplished through parenthood (Snarey et al., 1987). In psychology, generativity is considered a central development task in middle adulthood, and is associated with psychological well-being (Rothrauff and Cooney, 2008). Reproductive decision-making could be considered a part of this development. Peterson and Jenni (2003) found that men's reproductive decision-making is a process, where men went from having ambivalent feelings towards accepting loss of control and freedom, and embracing change. During this process, men implicitly became aware of their own mortality and began to measure out their own future through their future child. Taking Peterson and Jenni's findings into account when analysing the present results, it is likely that reasons given for or against having children reflect men's generative concerns, especially answers relating to passing something on.

Men who wanted children in the distant future seemed most concerned about practical issues, while men who wanted children sooner seemed more pre-occupied with relational matters. The importance of the relationship in reproductive decision-making has been described before, for example when some people chose to set aside their own wish for a child for the sake of a relationship (Lee and Zvonkovic, 2014). In the present study, men who were unsure about having children were also prone to weigh the relationship in their reasoning. Either they had not found the right partner (Statistics Sweden, 2009) or they would let the partner's wish or health determine the final decision. Doubters were also most worried that parenthood would imply loss of autonomy and freedom. These results can be related to findings from a Spanish study, where couples who discussed 'whether' to have children saw parenthood as a free, individual choice, while couples who talked about 'when' saw parenthood as a normal step in life (Alvarez, 2018). The present results indicate that if one sees procreation as a natural and biological impetus, one might not be that likely to consider the negative aspects of bringing new life to earth, but rather worry about not having found the right partner or consider practical issues (i.e. age, time, money).

Men who did not want children, on the other hand, mostly worried about the future of the world, practicalities and their skills as parents. Most reasons given against having children have been described before (Agrillo and Nelini, 2008; Alvarez, 2018; Henwood et al., 2011; Park, 2005). As for worry about the future, Overall and Caplan welcome this ethical discussion, claiming that the so-called urge or natural drive to procreate is not, in itself, a justification for action (Overall and Caplan, 2012). The ethical aspect is something that has been discussed in Swedish media lately, and having children has been presented as an environmentally-unfriendly act. Also, at the time of data collection for this study, the environment/climate was considered one of the most important political questions.

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Whether these ethical arguments will ultimately have an effect on national fertility rates remains to be seen. In any case, the study results do not support the idea of voluntarily childless people as overly self-centred, but rather altruistic.

Some men worried about not being a good enough father or believed that they were not the 'daddy-type'. Being an involved father is a strong cultural norm which is expected to demand a range of resources, such as time, devotion, patience, and physical and mental well-being (Forsberg, 2009; Park, 2005; Peterson and Jenni, 2003; Shirani, 2013). Hence, the norm is, to a high degree, built around middle-class standards. While some men believe that they will never become a 'daddy-type' because of their personality traits (Park, 2005), others hope to become a good father later when life conditions are better, and therefore postpone parenthood. Planning parenthood and waiting to become a parent until these criteria are met can be interpreted as means of trying to stay in control (Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). However, parenthood can only be planned to a certain extent, and it is impossible to know if one is capable of handling the challenges of parenthood before they have turned out. Possibly related to this, many men gave answers both for and against having children, regardless of whether or not they wanted to have children. This ambivalence in the reproductive decision-making process has also been noted by Peterson and Jenni (2003) and Sylvest et al. (2018), and could, according to Peterson and Jenni, be useful to discuss more openly with men to make them more aware of their feelings as well as their reproductive health and responsibilities.

Something that distinguishes the present results from studies with men in other countries is the absence of career worries. Although parenthood was considered as time-consuming, costly and a hindrance to personal development, it was not specifically described as a career barrier (Agrillo and Nelini, 2008; Park, 2005; Sylvest et al., 2018). This could reflect the reassuring effect that the welfare system has in Sweden, where it is illegal to discriminate against parents in the labour market, and all parents have the legal right to several months of paid parental leave, followed by access to high-quality, low-cost childcare. A recent Swedish study showed that fatherhood does not have a long-term negative effect on men's wages (Evertsson, 2016). Hence, being an involved father and having a career seems to be a plausible combination in the Swedish context, which is confirmed by demographic statistics (Oláh and Bernhardt, 2008). Men with a low level of education were not found to be less likely to want children, possibly because many men were still young and had not finished their studies. Still, an increasing number of men in Sweden with a low level of education and a low income remain childless throughout their lives. Are these men childless as they do not have the resources to live up to the (middle-class) gender-equal father ideal, or is it more acceptable for a working-class man to remain childless than it is for a middle-class man? Or is it a question of health inequity and unequal access to fertility treatment? The social mechanisms behind this need to be investigated further.

Methodological discussion

This study has methodological limitations that need to be discussed. Firstly, participants were recruited at sexual health clinics in two of the largest cities in Sweden and only included Swedish-speaking men. The sample is therefore not representative of the whole country. It is also likely that men seeking sexual health care, per se, constitute a selective group. For example, a high number of the participants had experienced STIs, unplanned pregnancies and abortions. Secondly, the answers analysed were very short, and often given under time pressure. There was no possibility to follow-up on men's answers to get a more profound understanding of their reasons. The findings should therefore be interpreted as 'what first came into men's minds'. If participants had had more time and space to describe their reasons, other things might have come up as relevant. Still, with these limitations in mind, the data were surprisingly rich in information. Answers reflected several social and cultural norms around fatherhood, relationships and family values, such as the two-child norm and involved fatherhood. The study also makes a contribution to the literature by providing information from a different composition of men than researched previously, including men with different relationship statuses and sexual orientations, and with or without children. Having open answers instead of predetermined alternatives for and against having children also contributed to a more nuanced picture of men's reproductive decision-making.

Another interesting aspect of the study was the unwillingness among men to take part in the study (434 men declined to participate). Recruitment was much more difficult than in a similar study with female university students (Stern et al., 2013). The people recruiting participants at the clinics revealed that many men were taken by surprise when asked to participate in the study. This says something about men's unfamiliarity to talk about their reproductive health and procreative intentions, and the gendered expectations that make it more permissible for a man, than a woman, to show disinterest in reproductive decision-making (Engwall and Peterson, 2010, Chapter 9). However, among those who did agree to participate, the response rate was high, which reveals that men do have something to say when asked.

Conclusion

These results show that there are many reasons why men want to have or not have children of their own. Hence, reproductive decision-making should not be considered a non-choice among men. Such an assumption consolidates gender norms that put major responsibility on women to care for decisions around childbearing and reproductive health, and, at the same time, ignore men's needs within the reproductive sphere. Instead, men could be encouraged to talk about their reproductive intentions, heighten their procreative consciousness, and be given space to discuss their possible ambivalent feelings. This could enable healthcare personal to become more aware of which life factors influence men's voluntary or involuntary state of parenthood or childlessness, and offer more targeted support.

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