The non-modern child?
Ambivalence about parenthood among young adults

Disa Bergnéhr
disa.bergnehr@liu.se

Eva Bernhardt
eva.bernhardt@sociology.su.se

The Young Adult Panel Study
Working Paper Series

YAPS WP 01/11
The non-modern child
Ambivalence about parenthood among young adults in Sweden

Abstract
In the present study, we investigate the meanings that having a child connotes for young adults in Sweden. In a rare research design, we draw on both survey data and focus group interviews, and thus we utilize the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative information. The child connotes dependence and stability and is likely to restrict the personal freedom of its parents, while at the same time children are supposed to make life more meaningful. This potentially creates ambivalent feelings about having a child, and possibly also about the (potential) child itself. We investigate and discuss the ambivalence found in the data by asking the following questions: How do men and women answer survey questions about the positive and negative implications having a child may have on their life? How do men and women in focus group interviews reason about the implications a child may have on their life? Both sorts of data provide evidence that young adults in Sweden are concerned about restrictions in their personal freedom as an expected negative consequence of becoming parents. The child connotes dependence and responsibilities in a society where independence and self-actualization are highly valued, and may thus be referred to as non-modern. Judging from the analysis of the survey data, it seems that young men are more worried about restricted personal freedom than are the young women, and this is the main reason behind their feeling more ambivalent. Post-secondary education increases the likelihood that the respondent is ambivalent. The overwhelming majority, of both men and women, in the data expect to make the transition to parenthood, at some point in their life, as this is regarded as a natural step to take and that the child adds meaning to life being a symbol of dependence, belonging and social relations – also valued aspects of life. However, they appear to strive to postpone the transition, so that they can enjoy the unrestricted freedom of single life for quite some time. This ambivalence is likely to contribute to an increasing age of becoming a mother or a father, without necessarily leading to more (final) childlessness. The present study contributes to the understanding of what notions and ideals young adults face, reproduce and act in relation to. It illuminates contemporary connotations of the child, and the ambivalence that different meanings of the child may cause.
Introduction

In the present study, we investigate the meanings that having a child connotes for young adults in Sweden. In a rare research design, we draw on both survey data and focus group interviews, and thus we can utilize the strengths of both quantitative and qualitative information. Focus group interviews illuminate the social and cultural reasoning around the meaning of the child. Such data give us indications of dominant norms and the (im)possibility to deviate from the particular norm (Wetherell 1998). Survey data can provide a statistically reliable, generalizable picture of how young adults refer to lifestyle implications of having a child, including an analysis of differences between men and women or, for example, between those of different educational background.

Sweden is a country with a long history of public policies aiming at supporting parents in the fostering and caring for children, and making possible the combination of parenthood (i.e. motherhood) and paid work. Several reforms were introduced already in the late 1930s and the following decades to encourage childbirth and facilitate auspicious parenthood and child well-being (Björklund 2006, Wennemo 1994). Today, in 2011, potential parents can look forward to 13 months of paid parental leave and easily available and subsidized childcare. Women participate in the paid labour market almost to the same extent as men and more than 95 percent of children between 2-5 years of age are enrolled in public or private child care. At the same time, the fertility rate in Sweden is relatively high, currently close to 2 children per woman (Statistics Sweden 2009a, 2009b).

In the last three decades we have witnessed a postponement of parenthood in Sweden, as a part of a general trend in most of the Western World. The mean age of Swedish first-time mothers is approaching 30. Thus it has increased substantially since the 1970s, when women’s mean age for entering parenthood was 24. There is also a slightly increasing proportion of women and men who remain childless. For women born in the 1940s, 11 percent did not enter parenthood, compared to 14 percent of the women born in the 1960s (Statistics Sweden 2009a). This is, however, considerably lower than in many other European countries, for example Austria, England, Finland, Germany and Italy (Sobotka 2004). In Sweden, most men and women still become parents at some stage in life (Bernhardt & Goldscheider 2006, Ds 2001, Jensen 2010).
Some argue that Swedish family policies have contributed to comparatively high fertility rates, enabling women to combine motherhood with career and paid work (Björklund 2006, Hoem 2005, McDonald 2000). But having a child impinges more on women’s careers and lives than on men’s. In 2008, fathers used 21 percent of the parental leave days, which is a high figure in international comparison but regarded as low in the Swedish political debate. It is common for mothers with preschool children to reduce their working hours but few fathers use this legislated opportunity (Statistics Sweden 2009b). In addition, mothers take on a larger burden compared to fathers in cases of divorce. In general, gender, ethnic background and socioeconomic status influence the experience of having a child. For instance, low socioeconomic standard and child poverty are found in families with lone mothers and parents with immigrant background (Fritzell, Gähler & Nermo 2007, Ringbäck Weitoft, Haglund & Rosén 2000, Statistics Sweden 2007).

It has been proposed that having a child in the 21st century demands more energy and time than previous decades. New ideologies of how to raise and care for a child have evolved, parallel with an increased pressure on men and women in paid employment. A parent is supposed to be attentive to the child’s needs, supportive of the child’s schooling and everyday activities, to protect the child from risks of different kinds, and to make the child’s self-confidence and health prosper. But s/he is also supposed and forced to put a lot of effort into work (to financially provide for the child/family), in times where the labour market is insecure and has high demands on efficiency and a flexible work force (Alwin 1996, Björnberg & Kollind 2005, Halldén 1992, Hays 1996, Hochschild 1997).

In Fawcett’s (1988) view, the entry to parenthood in the contemporary Western world is connected to monetary costs, less time for leisure time activities, decreasing flexibility and mobility, increasing responsibilities and concerns, and, for women, less time for career and the physical costs of childbearing, delivery and breastfeeding. Some benefits associated with having a child are: parenthood being a marker of adulthood and normalcy; the child brings new experiences and provides a permanent individual to love; and the child is a link between generations and family members. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002, 1995) suggest that parenthood has great social value for the individual because it justifies a refuge from demands on flexibility, career and self-fulfilling activities – a refuge from a self-centred life. In Swedish studies, parenthood is referred to as a natural step in life (Fagerberg 2000, Hagström
Young childless adults interpret strains and gains of parenthood by looking at friends, relatives and the wider social network, and by regarding their own upbringing (Bernardi 2003; Morgan & Berkowitz King 2001 – see also Jensen in the current volume). Thus, the connotations (and experiences) of having a child vary between different individuals, depending on gender, age, social and ethnic background, and individual experiences (Davies & Harré 1990, Phoenix, Woollett & Lloyd 1991). There are, however, also common notions and experiences on what parenthood implies, formed by the societal context in which we live.

The non-modern child and ambivalence

In the Western world people are influenced by the notion that one has a duty to oneself. The individual is supposed to prioritize his or her own needs and desires and to fulfil her/himself through education, work and leisure time (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Haas and Hwang 2007). Lee (2005) proposes that high status is given “to those able to sustain a performance of separateness, be it financial, emotional, cognitive or attitudinal performances” (p. 38). There is a general tension and anxiety connected with the decision to have a child, grounded on the ideal of being independent. The child will restrict one’s personal freedom and the “autonomy of one's own preferences is bound to be compromised, and ever anew: year by year; daily. One may become, horrors of horrors, ‘dependent’” (Bauman 2003, p. 43).

Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten (1997) suggest that the child is non-modern, being a symbol for dependence and care in a societal context where individual self-fulfilling and independence are highly valued. The child connotes dependence and stability and is likely to restrict the personal freedom of its parents, while at the same time children are supposed to make life more meaningful. This potentially creates ambivalent feelings about having a child, and possibly also about the (potential) child itself.

There appears to be a sociological ambivalence (Merton 1976) with regard to the child on the national, societal level that is reflected in individual aspirations and ideas: the child as imperative to (the future) society, and the child as restrictive. We live in a world with conflicting ideals and notions, and we as subjects are not always coherent in our opinions and practices. Competing ways to understand and experience a phenomenon, such the implications of having a child, may cause ambivalence for the individual (Davies and Harré 1999), although a minor group object to this being taken for granted (Engwall & Peterson 2011).

Our application of ambivalence is inspired by how it is used by the psychoanalyst Rozsika Parker (1995/2005). Parker discusses maternal ambivalence towards the child. She argues that ambivalence is understood as “contradictory impulses and emotions towards the same person (that) co-exist. The positive and negative components sit side by side and remain in opposition” (Parker, 1995/2005, p. 7). The relationship between negative and positive emotions is dynamic and subject to change, but the polarity between them remains. Parker argues that ambivalence is positive in that it creates individual reflection: what do I want, what do I feel, what are the reasons for me feeling and acting this way?

We believe that Parker’s use of ambivalence is applicable in our analysis on how mainly childless young adults define positive and negative implications of having a child. For example, it is possible to presume that when a person decides to start trying for a child, positive connotation of the child may dominate her or his feelings. For the person who justifies his or her decision to postpone parenthood, mainly negative aspects of having a child may be brought up and felt. Some people indicate more ambivalence than others, and the question we can ask (but perhaps not answer) is why.

**Research questions**

The aim of the present study is to explore the following questions: How do men and women answer survey questions about the positive and negative implications having a child may have on their life? How do men and women in focus group interviews reason about the implications having a child may have on their life? In addition, our aim is to detect the possible ambivalence that different meanings of the child may render.

In the survey a random sample of young adults are confronted with specific questions that they are asked to evaluate and form an opinion about. Thus one can for example say that about half of all childless Swedes in the age span from 22 to 34 expect life to become more meaningful when they become parents while about 40 percent of the women and 50 percent of the men expect the transition to parenthood to entail less personal freedom. Focus group data, on the other hand, can give an idea of what such an opinion really means – in what way does life become more meaningful and what does it mean when young people think that they will
experience less personal freedom when they become parents? Thus, qualitative data can put more ‘flesh’ on hard statistical facts.

Survey data

The quantitative data set consists of information from a panel study with about 3500 respondents, born in 1968, 1972, 1976, and 1980 (Young Adult Panel Study, YAPS, [www.suda.su.se/yaps](http://www.suda.su.se/yaps)). Three waves have been conducted, in 1999, 2003 and 2009. In this paper we utilize data from the 2003 survey. Thus the respondents were aged 22-34 years. Among the many attitudinal questions included in the survey questionnaire, one set was intended to measure parenthood attitudes. Childless respondents were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 to 5, whether they expected less personal freedom, economic problems, less time for friends, a better partner relationship, and/or a more meaningful life, as a result of becoming a parent. Earlier analysis of the parenthood attitudes among childless young adults in Sweden (Bernhardt 2004) has shown that among the three items indicating (likely) negative consequences of parenthood (less personal freedom, economic problems, less time for friends) it is the first item that is of the most concern to the respondents – that is, it is the statement which the respondents are most likely to agree with- while ‘a more meaningful life’ seems to carry more weight than the expectation of a better partner relationship. In the quantitative part of our analysis of the expected consequences of parenthood among childless young adults in Sweden, we will therefore focus on those two, and we will use information for a sample of 1 552 childless respondents (743 women and 809 men).

Results: Analysis of survey data

Do young men and women in Sweden expect the transition to parenthood to result in less personal freedom and/or a more meaningful life? Figures 1 and 2 illustrate the percentage distributions of the responses of men and women, respectively. The scale went from 1=disagree completely to 5=agree completely, and about 40 percent of the women and 50 percent of the men indicated a value of 4 or 5 to the question about restricted personal freedom, while a little over half of both men and women gave the same response (4 or 5) to the question about parenthood resulting in a more meaningful life. Thus it is clear that the majority have positive expectations of parenthood entailing a more meaningful life, but also that many anticipate that this will mean less personal freedom.
About 25 percent of the respondents expressed ‘ambivalence’, in the sense that they expected both less personal freedom and a more meaningful life. It is hard to dispute that a more meaningful life is considered as something positive, while it can of course be questioned that less personal freedom necessarily carries a negative connotation. However, we would argue that a child is highly likely to restrict parents in a society where independence and flexibility are highly valued characteristics of life (Bauman 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, Lee 2005). In most cases, therefore, less personal freedom is probably conceived of as a negative aspect of becoming a parent, even if some people might accept this as an unavoidable concomitant of a highly desired life transition.

Thus, although expecting both less personal freedom and a more meaningful life is not necessarily contradictory standpoints, it can be assumed that holding both these views is likely to create some ambivalence about making the transition to parenthood. We have therefore constructed a four-category variable in the following way:

1. **Ambivalent**  
   Have indicated 4 or 5 on the scale (1-5) regarding both ‘personal freedom’ and ‘meaningfulness’

2. **Positively inclined**  
   Have a high value on ‘meaningfulness’ and a low (not high) on ‘personal freedom’

3. **Negatively inclined**  
   The reverse

4. **Neutral**  
   Have values less than 4 on both ‘personal freedom’ and ‘meaningfulness’

The percentage distributions of the parenthood attitude variable for men and women, as well as their distributions on the other measures we include in this analysis, are shown in Table 1. Roughly 30 percent of both men and women are defined as ‘positively inclined’, and about 20 percent as ‘negatively inclined’ (with men slightly less positive and slightly more negative
than women). The major difference between men and women is that men are much more likely to be ‘ambivalent’ while more women fall in the ‘neutral’ category (neither expecting less personal freedom nor a more meaningful life).

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics. Childless young adults in Sweden.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenthood attitude</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Both sexes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ambivalent</td>
<td>31,2</td>
<td>21,4</td>
<td>26,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positively inclined</td>
<td>28,9</td>
<td>31,8</td>
<td>30,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negatively inclined</td>
<td>22,9</td>
<td>19,5</td>
<td>21,1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neutral</td>
<td>17,0</td>
<td>27,3</td>
<td>22,4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Both sexes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>39,6</td>
<td>45,2</td>
<td>42,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>28,9</td>
<td>30,4</td>
<td>29,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30</td>
<td>20,0</td>
<td>16,9</td>
<td>18,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>34</td>
<td>11,4</td>
<td>7,8</td>
<td>9,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Post-secondary education</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Both sexes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>48,0</td>
<td>56,0</td>
<td>52,2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Living with a partner</th>
<th>Men</th>
<th>Women</th>
<th>Both sexes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>42,9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>46,5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Permanent job</th>
<th>Temporary job</th>
<th>Studies</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>53,6</td>
<td>9,2</td>
<td>26,7</td>
<td>10,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>41,5</td>
<td>13,6</td>
<td>33,5</td>
<td>11,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>47,3</td>
<td>11,5</td>
<td>30,2</td>
<td>11,0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| N          | 743 | 809  | 1552     |

This four-category variable is the outcome variable for our analysis. As predictors, in addition to age and gender, we also include educational level and relationship status as explanatory variables. As can be seen in Table 1, roughly half of the respondents in our sample have a post-secondary education and roughly half live with a partner at the time of the survey (most of them cohabiting rather than married). Moreover, we include a four-category variable indicating their job situation, i.e. whether they have a permanent or a temporary job, are studying or ‘other’ (unemployed, in military service or (full-time) housewives). In addition, we control for age, as almost all young adults are childless at age 22 (93%), while the still childless at age 34 constitute a minority (25 %). Many transitions take place in the lives of young adults between age 22 and age 34. For example, while, according to our survey data,
61% were unpartnered at age 22, the overwhelming majority (80%) were living with a partner at age 34 (total sample). Many also make the transition to parenthood and are therefore not included in our cross-sectional sample which consists of those still childless. The percentage positively inclined among our childless respondents consequently decreases with age, from 33 to 20 percent, because of this selection effect, while the proportion ambivalent increases from 26 to 35 percent (results not shown). This is important to keep in mind, when the results of our cross-sectional analysis of parenthood attitudes are presented.

As one would expect, we find that age has a positive effect on being in any of the three categories of ‘ambivalent’, ‘negatively inclined’ and ‘neutral’, or, in other words, the older the respondent the less likely they are to be positively inclined. This is of course because of the selection effect mentioned above: those who see more advantages than disadvantages in becoming a parent are more likely to make the transition, and therefore leave our sample, which consists of those still childless. In our cross-sectional analysis, age is therefore an important control variable.

Table 2 in about here

In the joint model, including both men and women, we find that males, compared to females, are significantly more likely to be ambivalent, and less likely to be neutral, with no effect on being negatively inclined. Living with a partner significantly decreases the likelihood of being anything other than positively inclined, with a negative effect on all the other three categories. Having a post-secondary education increases the likelihood that the respondent has ambivalent feelings about parenthood, with no effect on being negatively inclined or neutral. Being a student increases the likelihood that a young adult feels negatively inclined, while there is no effect of having a temporary rather than a permanent position in the labour market. If they are neither in the labour market nor students (most of whom are unemployed), they are more likely to fall in the ‘neutral’ category, probably because for them having a child is not yet on the agenda. Education only affects the contrast between being ambivalent and being positively inclined, while there is no difference between the other three attitude categories.

Thus, a post-secondary education does not make the young adults more (or less) likely to be negatively inclined (or neutral) compared to those positively inclined.

Are there any differences between men and women in how these factors influence parenthood attitudes? Interestingly enough, we find that men, as they get older (and still are childless) are
more likely to have ambivalent feelings about parenthood, while we don’t find this effect for women, who, on the other hand, tend to become more negatively inclined or neutral. Living with a partner seems crucial to decrease ambivalent feelings among men, while the only significant effect for women is a negative effect on being neutral, i.e. neither worrying about restricted personal freedom nor expecting life to become more meaningful.

When we analyze men and women separately, post-secondary education has no significant effect on parenthood attitudes, probably because of the smaller number of cases. However, a post-secondary education seems to increase ambivalence for both men and women, while the effects on being negatively inclined or neutral are in the opposite directions for men and women. However, testing the interaction between gender and education (not shown) showed that there is no (significant) gender difference. Thus we cannot say that men with post-secondary education are more likely to feel ambivalence than are highly educated women. This is an interesting finding as one can suspect that in a historical perspective, going back to a period when highly educated women were more likely than highly educated men to remain childless, one would find a distinct gender difference, with highly educated women being more ambivalent than highly educated men. Although we only have indirect evidence for this, it would seem that ambivalence among highly educated men has increased over time, while that of highly educated women has decreased, creating the current situation of no gender difference.

So in fact, including interactions between gender and the other explanatory variables does not give any support to an argument that these factors have different effects for men and for women. But men are significantly more likely to be ambivalent about parenthood, and post-secondary education has a similar effect, while living with a partner decreases ambivalence, especially for men.

A relevant question of course is whether ambivalence has any effect on actual childbearing – are the ambivalent ones less likely to express intentions about having children in the future than are those whom we have defined as ‘positively inclined’? Analyzing the answers to some questions about future childbearing, and defining ‘birthplans’ as those who say that they think they will have a child within the next five years, we find that about two-thirds of the ‘positively inclined’ (73% of the women and 60% of the men) not surprisingly fall in this category. But the figure among the ambivalent is not much lower; in fact, 57 percent of them have birthplans, compared to 34 percent among the negatively inclined, and about half of
those defined as ‘neutral’. So it seems that among many of the ambivalent, it is the expected positive consequence of having children – that life will become more meaningful – that overshadows their worries about restrictions in their personal freedom. Whether they will actually realize their birthplans is, however, beyond the scope of this paper.

**Focus group data**

The analysis of the focus group data is based on nine focus groups, conducted in 2002 and 2003, with in total 35 individuals between 24 and 39 years old, 23 women and 12 men. The participants had different educational, geographical and occupational backgrounds. 20 participants were childless, 7 men and 13 women; 3 were expecting their first child, 2 men and 1 woman; and 12 were first time parents with a child between 3 weeks and 20 months old, 2 men and 10 women.¹

In the present paper, we analyze the discussions that followed from the guiding questions: Is a child something you anticipate having at some stage in life? Why? Why not? Was having a child something you anticipated long before you decided to try for one? Why did you decide to try for a child when you did? How do/did you imagine life as a parent compared to life without a child?

Focus group data have the potential to provide us with cultural representation of a certain phenomenon, such as norms and ideals of what having a child implies for the parent(s). When the participants discuss a topic, several views surface and varying positions are taken. The discussion makes it possible for the researcher to detect reoccurring and dominant ideals

---

¹ The groups consisted of participants living in small towns or at the countryside (18), 4 men and 14 women; in a for Sweden large city (14), 8 men and 6 women; and in a middle sized city (3), 3 women. Some participants were university college students (12), 6 men and 6 woman; some were working with high school degrees (10), 3 men and 7 woman; others were working with university college degrees (11), 2 men and 9 women; and some were unemployed (2), 1 man and 1 woman. (Some were on parental leave but those are counted as working/student/unemployed depending on their occupational status prior having the child.) The focus group discussions took between 1 to 1.5 hours. They were free-flowing, and personal experiences were shared together with reflections over societal trends. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and the names changed to guarantee anonymity. For methodological discussion and further information about the focus group data, see Bergnéhr 2008.
versus less frequently and perhaps more questioned standpoints (Morgan 1998, Wetherell 1998). The reasoning that appears and individual positioning are co-constructed within the focus group context. Individual positioning is always situated, influenced by the focus group composition, group dynamic, and the historical and societal context. The focus group discussion ‘forces’ the individual to affirm, negotiate or object to (or to be silent to) what is stated and brought up. Thus, the discussions give us examples of societal norms and ideals concurrently with the ways the individual positions him/herself in relation to these ideals (Edley 2001, Wilkinson 2003).

Results: Analysis of focus group data
In the analysis that follows, we scrutinize the focus group participants’ reasoning around the child as being restrictive upon one’s personal freedom, and the child as something that adds meaning to life. The small sample, with considerably fewer men participating, makes it hard to draw any conclusions with regard to the possible impact of gender and educational and occupational background on individual positioning. We will point at tendencies where we see them, but one interesting result of the focus group data is that there are recurring, overall ways of reasoning that are similar to the groups and individuals, regardless of gender, place of residency, occupational and educational background, and being a first time parent or childless. This indicates that there are dominant, societal discourses that impact on the ways life style ideals and the child are referred to.

Less personal freedom
Having a child implies a change of life, and to some extent, it restricts the freedom of the parent(s). This is brought up in all focus groups as a major reason for deferring parenthood. Similar to the quantitative sample, and to Ellingsaeter’s and Pedersen’s chapter, economic implications of the child are comparatively rarely raised. Individual freedom come across as being highly valued aspects of life, in accordance with what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002), Lee (2005) and Bauman (2003) suggest. Eva, first time parent, 38 years old with a university degree and a high qualified job, justifies her deferral of having a child with wanting to “have time to travel and to hang around in pubs for ten years. I mean there are lots of things to do, at least for me, because these things are fun” (FG8). Eva describes her life prior to having a child to be filled with partying and socializing. She had her university degree and a good job, but life still had much to offer. The life she was living, she argues in the interview, was not possible to combine with being a (good enough) parent. In the focus group data
overall, having a child is connected to a new kind of life. The child connotes responsible parenting behavior and such behavior is not associated with activities such as clubbing and adventurous travel. A responsible parent has settled down and is ready to live a child-centered life where the first priority is the child’s needs (Bergnéhr 2010).

Tobias, a 30 years old man with a high school degree and a temporary job who resides in a small village with his girlfriend of five years, justifies his prior hesitation to have a child similar although not equivalent to Eva and participants with post high school degrees. Tobias does not stress education, but brings up travelling and the desire “to experience stuff, before you have a child” (30, FG9), in order to minimize the risk of as a parent feeling restricted. This sort of reasoning is found in all focus groups and among the majority of participants, although what should be experienced (education, work, hobbies, travel etc.) differs depending on educational background and aspirations.

Agneta, a 29 years old first time parent with a high school degree, who resides in a country area with her husband and partner for 10 years, justifies her hesitation about having a child with the risk of it being restrictive upon her main interest and priority, horses. She describes her decision to start trying for a child being filled with ambivalence: she wanted a child, sometime in life, but she did not anticipate the restrictions it would imply. Her partner had wanted to have a child for quite some time, and Agneta phrases her decision to try for a child as something she just had to do, without feeling a great desire to do so.

There are other participants in the data who position themselves similar to Agneta, parents and childless. Their way of referring to the pros and cons of parenthood come across as rather ambivalent, primarily because they appear to connect parenthood with great restrictions, or refer to having done so before making the decision to have a child. Yet others are less ambivalent in their reasoning. These do not, to the same extent, depict parenthood as something potentially restricting and straining.

Sabina, 29 years old and cohabiting with Tobias (FG9), is referring to a number of reasons why she has been hesitant to have a child. Similar to others, she emphasizes the importance of getting to know the partner well, with the more or less implicit understanding that a child would restrict such opportunities:
Sabina: It becomes another kind of life when you have a child, absolutely. You want to be together you and your partner first, to get to know each other and to do things together the two of you. (FG9)

To find a partner and to get to know him or her by doing lots of things together prior to having a child, is depicted as the best possible strategy to avoid the risk of relationship dissolution (Bergnér 2006). Ella, 33 years old, single, with a university degree, talks about her own upbringing with a lone mother and refers to these experiences as being the reason for it being of such great importance for her to try to avoid separation: “I’ve seen my mum, how she strived and struggled to get it all to work when my parents divorced. I was nine and my sister seven” (FG3). Lone motherhood is referred to by both men and women as particularly hard and restricting – something to avoid with all means. Being a single mother is connoted to great struggle and little room for recreation, a life where one is bound to care. It is a life very far from the notion of being free, independent and self-actualizing. Lone fatherhood is not once referred to in the data, suggesting the implicit notion that after separation, a child stays with the mother – supporting the proposal that the woman is seen as the primary parent and the one most responsible (Phoenix, Woollett & Lloyd 1991).

All but one childless participant say they anticipate having children at some stage in life. Mona, a 24 years old woman who studies at a university college in a large city (FG5), refutes parenthood. She talks about her mother’s dependence on her father financially and socially as a housewife, as something she tries to avoid. However, when justifying her disinclination to parenthood, she embraces the notion that a child should be cared for in the home rather than at a day care centre. Mona argues that as a mother, she would never put the child in day care, and due to this parenthood would not be possible to combine with her ambition to have a career and paid employment, that is, her affirmation of independence. Consequently, parenthood had to be excluded from her anticipated life course. Mona’s positioning towards parenthood is not ambivalent per se – she primarily depicts the child as restrictive. But the positioning towards her mother who stayed at home caring for the children while the father was the sole breadwinner is ambivalent. Mona embraces the notion of caring for children at home but also dismisses her mother’s dependence on the father.
Interesting to note is that neither Mona nor any of the other focus group participants\(^2\) suggested that a potential male partner could stay home with the child, thus enabling Mona to combine motherhood with paid work. In the data overall, being a parent comes across as a lonely endeavor. Partners are very seldom mentioned when strains of having a child are referred to, which appears a bit peculiar considering the prevalent Swedish political discourse on gender equally and family policies promoting shared responsibilities between parents. On the other hand, it may be indicative of parenting practices, where women in most families are the primary parent, and parental activities differ between men and women (see e. g. Bekkengen 2002, Phoenix, Woollett & Lloyd 1991) – in that respect having a child may be perceived as an individual project, at least when connected to everyday chores and negative aspects such as lack of energy and a stressful life. In addition, our reading of Parker (1995/2005) suggests that it may be common, in the current cultural context, that ‘negative’ emotions and depriving experiences connected to having a child (to be a mother) are referred to as something one experiences alone, an inner feeling caused by intrinsic reasons, while positive aspects more often is connected to mutuality and togetherness, with the child and/or partner. The following section partly supports this analysis.

\textit{A more meaningful life}

Overall, the focus group participants depict parenthood to be a natural and normal status to enter, at some stage in life. To choose not to have a child is to deviate from the norm. Some of the first time mothers talked about attaining a higher social status after having the child. Several participants refer to feeling pressured to have a child but also about the desire to affirm the anticipated life course (Bergnéhr 2009). This means that social pressure in contradiction to personal desires may cause ambivalent feelings for individuals who do not feel an inner drive or strong desire to become a parent.

A few focus group participants do not affirm the recurring position that the child risks to restrain the personal freedom negatively. It is among the comparatively young parents (Maja, 26, FG2; Anita, 27, FG4) and parents to be (Nathan, 26, FG7; Noah, 26, FG9) that this tendency is found. These participants appear less ambivalent in their feelings towards the child. Having a child is talked about as a natural step to take, with little worries and

\(^2\) The group consisted of four men and three women, all childless and studying at higher education.
uncertainties involved in the decision. Maja, for instance, opposes the notion that a child would result in lifestyle restrictions. She, in accordance with Nathan and Anita, does not raise travel and hobbies as important ingredients in life. As Maja expresses it, the criterion to start trying for a child was to have a post high school education and a stable income. That accomplished, at the age of 25, she and her partner decided the time was right to try for a child.

In the data, one positive aspect of parenthood that is raised is the new experiences it involves. The quotation of Carl signifies this common way to reason:

Carl: If I had reached the point that I felt ‘now I want a family’, then I would probably regard the restriction as something positive, that I choose the child above other things, and that other things become less important. I’m fully convinced that the change is going to be massive, socially with your friends, and what you choose to do, but I don’t think it’s going to be a poorer life in any way, quite the contrary it will result in many new possibilities. (FG5)

Childless participants who connote parenthood with less personal freedom but in addition express a desire to enter parenthood at some stage, and first time parents who understand their postponement of the transition as a result of the potential restriction it could cause, ‘solve’ the dilemma with the ambivalent positioning by referring to a naturally changed self. Like Carl above, they talk about the child as preceding or leading to a personal change, on the condition that the child is planned and desired. The changed self acknowledges the needs of the child first and foremost, without feelings of being personally restrained. In addition, it is emphasized that the child engenders new experiences, and that parenthood in this respect enables a continuation of a self-fulfilling life.

But the child is also a reason for slowing down – an escape from self-actualization. And the child is referred to as being the glue to social relations, such as between the partners and between family and friends (Bergnéhr 2009). In this line of reasoning, the child connotes belonging and dependence, rather than the risk of personal restraint. The meaning of having a child is to belong to other individuals and to have other individuals who depend and belong to you. This positive meaning of having a child is brought up by childless participants as well as by first time parents.
Ambivalent positions

There are some participants in the focus group that appear less burdened by ambivalent positions. They do not express uncertainty and anxiety over becoming a parent, and they do not connote the child with personal restrictions that would affect their lives negatively. We find first time parents as well as childless participants, showing this sign of being less ambivalent. There are others, emphasizing great concerns on how life as a parent would be. First time parents talk about feeling hesitant to try for a child, and childless participants recurrently refer to possible tribulations with parenthood. Those who come across as being most worried are women. They, more than men, refer to restrictions and strains that having a child would imply. However, the focus group sample is small, with fewer men than women, so any general conclusions cannot be made.

Parker (1995/2005) argues that it is important to acknowledge both negative and positive feelings towards a child, and to see ambivalent feelings as part of life and relationships. But, she proposes, it is often difficult for parents, in particular mothers, to express negative feelings towards the child; negative parental feelings are not part of the cultural construction of motherhood. In the focus group data, there are recurring strategies that the participants (both men and women) use to avoid ambivalent positions. All but a few bring up negative and positive aspects of having a child. They refer to the child as being restrictive, and to the child as adding further meaning to life. When justifying the desire to have a child, they talk about the changing self. The reasoning goes that having a child naturally changes the parent’s desires and priorities – you wish to do what is best for the child, and you desire a new kind of (family) life. Many participants come across as confident that this changed self will evolve. Others, however, appear more uncertain. What happens if I have a child but feel restricted by it and nothing else? What happens if I have a child and I feel no inclinations of wanting to change my life? The strategy to solve the dilemma, as they explain it, is to postpone having a child, and/or to, as Amanda (FG3) puts it: to just “throw yourself in, and see to it that you come out on the other side somehow”.

Concluding discussion

In the present study, we analyze both survey data and focus group interviews in an unusual combination of quantitative and qualitative data. The survey data gives us information about the extent to which Swedish childless men and women expect less personal freedom and/or a
more meaningful life, as a result of becoming a parent. In addition, the focus group data illuminate the meanings attributed to ‘less personal freedom’ and ‘a more meaningful life’.

The strains and gains of having a child are in accordance with Fawcett’s (1988) suggestions, although monetary costs are not stressed. The pertinent norm in the Western World is to connote the child with emotional benefits, and not with financial costs (Zelizer 1985), which may be a reason for the lack of emphasis on monetary costs of having a child, in the survey as well as in the focus groups (see Ellingsaeter & Pedersen in the current volume). In the focus groups, the strains of having a child which are most emphasized are less time and energy for one’s own hobbies and desires, for educational aspirations and the partner, and an overall more immobile life. Benefits associated with having a child are a new life with new experiences, and new member of the family to love, and the child as a person who ties generations and people together. The child also, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) have proposed, adds meaning to life it that it becomes a refuge from self-actualizing activities – the child is a legitimate reason to slow down.

To feel ambivalent about certain things is no doubt part of being human (see e.g. Merton 1976; Parker 1995/2005). But contemporary sociologists suggest that ambivalence permeates the everyday lives, notions and feelings of people, perhaps more than ever (Bauman 2003, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002, 1995, Lee 2005). One reason for this is the strong ideal to be independent, and the notion that a person should realize her or his own desires, whatever those may be, parallel with the strong desire to belong, to a partner, to a family, and to a community. The intimate relationships, the family and particularly the child, connote dependence and obligations towards other individuals than oneself. In this way, the child can be called non-modern (Bäck-Wiklund & Bergsten 1997). But the child can also be referred to as modern. In the focus group data, we see how having a child is connected not only to individual constraint, but also to individual progress – the child offers new experiences and opportunities. When the desire to have a child is justified, focus group participants refer to the child as a self-fulfilling project. When the deferral of parenthood is understood, the child is referred to as a possible restraint.

Some have called Sweden one of the most individualistic countries in the world (Reher 1998). It can thus be asked, somewhat jokingly but also with sincerity whether Swedes are human, with their individualistic aspirations and self-maintained practices (Berggren & Trädgårds
The individualised Sweden is part of the welfare state that has developed in the 20th century, welfare policies that have promoted individual independence, for instance through individual taxations, and sick leave insurance, parental insurance and unemployment insurance, which are all tied to the individual and his or her previous earnings. In this respect, the individualism is institutionalised – it is a result of political and economic structures (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). But people also need intimacy, and feelings of belonging to a family, group and/or community. Perhaps, because Sweden is so individualistic in many ways, the child is so highly valued, since parenthood is supposed to lead to life signified by belonging, dependence, family and togetherness. The reasoning in the focus group data supports this argument. The individualised Sweden may cause people to postpone parenthood, because it will restrict personal freedom, but it may in addition make people view parenthood as a natural step to take, something highly valued since the child connotes family, togetherness and a permanent person to love (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). In a study of the relationship between family status and subjective well-being (Bernhardt and Fratczak 2005), it was found that having children significantly increased life satisfaction in Sweden.

Both our survey data and the focus group data provide evidence that young adults in Sweden are indeed concerned about restrictions in their personal freedom as an expected negative consequence of becoming parents. Judging from the analysis of the survey data, it seems that young men are more worried about restricted personal freedom than are the young women, and this is the main reason behind their feeling more ambivalent. Post-secondary education increases the likelihood that the respondent is ambivalent. It may imply that the respondents perceive the child as restrictive on education and career. The focus group data support this suggestion. Participants with higher education and those who were studying at the time of the interview refer to post high school studies to be one reason for not yet having a child, talking about studies as too demanding to combine with (good) parenthood or the time as student as a time devoted to individual self-fulfillment. Participants with high school degrees bring up the need for a self-fulfilling period with responsibility only to oneself, but exclude studies and refer to travel, hobbies and socializing with friends as activities where a child would be an unwanted restriction.

Some focus group participants come across as more ambivalent than others. They brought up several negative aspects of parenthood, and they appeared more worried and concerned about what having a child could imply, compared to participants who did not show signs of
ambivalence. Some of the first time parents talked about having decided to try for a child, although still feeling hesitant about it. The overwhelming majority, of both men and women, in both the survey and focus group data expect to make the transition to parenthood, at some point in their life, as this is regarded as a natural step to take. Very few seem to have made up their mind to remain childless; however, they may strive to postpone this important life-course transition, so that they can enjoy the unrestricted freedom of single life for quite some time. Thus, this ambivalence is likely to contribute to an increasing age of becoming a mother or a father, without necessarily leading to more (final) childlessness.

The present study contributes to the understanding of what notions and ideals young adults face, reproduce and act in relation to. It illuminates contemporary connotations of the child, and the ambivalence that different meanings of the child may cause. Studies like this are important in that they provide information that may take us “closer to understanding ‘why’ people behave in certain ways and their own representations of their rationales” (Randall & Koppenhaver 2008, p. 58). This sort of knowledge seems imperative, for instance for politicians and policy makers but perhaps also for professionals in the health care sector that meet young adults, parents and parents to be.

References


### Table 2. Parenthood attitudes among childless young adults in Sweden. Multinomial logit. Hazard ratios (reference category=positively inclined)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Men</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Women</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th>Both</th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>ambivalent</td>
<td>neg.inclined</td>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>ambivalent</td>
<td>neg.inclined</td>
<td>neutral</td>
<td>ambivalent</td>
<td>neg.inclined</td>
<td>neutral</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male vs female</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1.6036***</td>
<td>1.2547</td>
<td>0.6600**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age (continuous)</td>
<td>1.0522(*)</td>
<td>1.0448</td>
<td>1.0416</td>
<td>1.0288</td>
<td>1.0656*</td>
<td>1.0644*</td>
<td>1.0418*</td>
<td>1.0525*</td>
<td>1.0548*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Living with a partner</td>
<td>0.6507*</td>
<td>0.7284</td>
<td>0.9585</td>
<td>0.8493</td>
<td>0.7101</td>
<td>0.7009(*)</td>
<td>0.7302*</td>
<td>0.7218*</td>
<td>0.7823(*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Post-secondary education</td>
<td>1.2230</td>
<td>0.8514</td>
<td>1.1327</td>
<td>1.3963</td>
<td>1.2489</td>
<td>0.9008</td>
<td>1.3065(*)</td>
<td>1.0329</td>
<td>0.9742</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Permanent employment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Temporary employment</td>
<td>1.2602</td>
<td>0.5250</td>
<td>0.8148</td>
<td>0.7596</td>
<td>1.4625</td>
<td>1.3643</td>
<td>1.0457</td>
<td>0.9709</td>
<td>1.1394</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Studies</td>
<td>1.4264</td>
<td>1.3854</td>
<td>1.0849</td>
<td>1.1930</td>
<td>1.5627</td>
<td>1.2808</td>
<td>1.3227</td>
<td>1.4375(*)</td>
<td>1.2008</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1.5656</td>
<td>1.0225</td>
<td>1.7763</td>
<td>1.1105</td>
<td>1.0320</td>
<td>1.3184</td>
<td>1.3223</td>
<td>1.0047</td>
<td>1.4742(*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>N</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>743</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>809</td>
<td>1552</td>
<td>1552</td>
<td>1552</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>