

## **Gendered Spaces of Reproduction:**

The place of children in networks of men and women.

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### **Abstract**

*While most European countries have experienced very low fertility for a long period, fertility in Norway increased from a low point by the mid-1980s to one of the highest levels in Europe. Paradoxically, during the same period childlessness among men has also grown. This paper concentrates on the place of children in young people's personal networks through a gender perspective. Are children an issue men and women talk about with friends? Is childbearing impacted through personal networks and if so, is there a gender difference? The paper analyses semi-structured interviews of 90 Norwegian men and women in their prime reproductive ages. The analysis suggests that men have fewer children in their personal networks and do not discuss childbearing with friends, much in contrast to women. The 'reproductive space' is highly gendered and has also a class dimension. While most childless upper middle class men live with partners and maybe fathers after years of discussions, in working class childless men primarily live without partners. Here fatherhood is less planned but also less questioned.*

## Introduction

Across industrialized countries young people spend more time with friends and have fewer children. What does this tell us about the place of children in young people's lives? In his seminal article Ariès (1985) claimed: *'The days of the child-king are over. The under-40 generation is leading us into a new epoch, one in which the child occupies a smaller place, to say the least.'* (p. 649). Since this article was published the childless life for the under-40s has expanded.

This paper uses the case of Norway to discuss the place of children among young people, and men in particular. In contrast to most European countries Norwegian fertility rates have increased over the last decades to reach 1.85 in 2012.<sup>1</sup> However, over the past 25 years or so, while fertility was increasing among women, the proportion of childless men was also climbing. My attention is turned to fertility by focussing on men primarily. *Are children an issue men and women talk about with friends? Is childbearing impacted through personal networks and if so, is there a gender difference?* My data source is primarily the qualitative study *The Social Meaning of Children. Reproductive Choice, Gender and Social Class*, which includes both genders as well as childless and parents.<sup>2</sup>

## Theories and previous studies

As Bott (1957) declared half a century ago, 'any sort of group is related to its environment' (p. 249). She distinguished between 'close-knit' and 'loose-knit' relationships. Granovetter (1973) maintains that network analysis provides a link between small-scale interaction and large-scale patterns. His attention was turned to the density of networks in claiming that 'weak ties' are sites where people pick up new ideas since they 'move in circles different from our own' (p. 1371) and thus are 'more likely to link people of different small groups' (p. 1375). In a later work Granovetter (1978) examined the importance of 'threshold levels' for new behaviour to develop.

Recent network theorists lean on these ideas such as Valente (1996) in arguing for the impact of social influence, as most 'prefer to wait until other people have tried it first' (p. 69) – a rephrasing of Granovetter's bandwagon effect. Mische (2011) makes an overview of forms of

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<sup>1</sup> Although a decline took place after 2009 <https://www.ssb.no/en/befolkning/statistikker/fodte>.

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network studies, among them network as pipelines of *social influence* on attitudes, ideas and innovation. A social influence depends on ‘the establishment of a structure of expectations on the behaviours of actors in the network’ (Fuhse 2009: 52) argues; ‘the meaning structure’.

Few fertility studies have employed network analysis. Among them Bernardi (2003) claims, in line with Granovetter, that loose relationships may confront people with ‘the attitudes, behaviour and comments in a world of others, kin and non-kin’ (p. 528). Through a variation of networks people are ‘exposed to diverse models of parenthood’ (Bernardi and Oppo, 2007: 197). They suggest that new behaviour is formed through *social learning* in networks. In a later work Keim, Klärner and Bernardi (2009) identified networks of friends as the ‘blind spot’ of fertility analysis. A broad social environment may help us understand why attitudes to childbearing has remained positive ‘even in contexts where macro-social change has rendered having children more difficult’ (Rossier and Bernardi, 2009: 483) they argue.

Also Lutz, Skirbekk and Testa (2006) focus on the impact of the social environment on fertility. They suggest that ‘a low fertility trap’ may evolve because: *‘The fewer the children belonging to the environment that the young people experience the lower the number of children that will be part of their normative system in terms of what is a desirable life’* (p. 13). As more young people do not have children in their surroundings the normative ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of having children may weaken. Sobotka and Testa (2008) confirm that ‘many young Europeans do not perceive parenthood as an inevitable part of their life course’ (ibid: 191). But as the figures show they are more often men than women.

Fertility decline in the industrialized world has primarily been seen as a consequence of changes in women’s roles (Lesthaeghe 1996). A decade after the formulation of the Second Demographic Transition-theory ‘the world was turned upside down’ (Castle 2003). The highest fertility levels were found in countries where women were educated and employed (see also Billari and Kohler 2004). A positive association between gender equality and fertility seemed to be in motion (McDonald 2006; Esping-Andersen 2009). Myrskylä, Kohler and Billari (2009) point to Norway as a primary example on the reversal of fertility decline in Europe. However, these assumptions on a positive link between gender equality and fertility are usually centred on women. Little is known about men’s fertility in the wake of changes in women’s roles.

Jensen (1998) found that the propensity to live with children varies by gender; women are more likely to live with children (as single or with partner), than men.<sup>3</sup> But there is no conclusive evidence on the impact of gender equality on men's fertility in Europe. Puur et al. (2008) found that egalitarian attitudes were in accordance with both higher fertility aspirations and a higher number of children and predicted: 'In the long run, this may indicate some positive prospects for Europe's fertility development, depending on the accomplishment of the gender revolution.' (p. 1902). Schneider and Becker (2012) are less optimistic. Traditional attitudes to gender roles remain strong. The 'genderized status ranking system' put employment over family and men risk a loss of human capital by active fatherhood (p. 252). Using Norway as example Jensen (2010) suggests that gender equality may motivate women to have more children, but the impact on men may be the opposite as: 'Care and domestic work may represent different "basins of attraction", but also represent different risks in societies in which economic structures remain gendered.' (p. 14).

Qualitative studies suggest that the 'new fatherhood' challenges the traditional basis of masculinity (Behnke and Meuser 2012). Fathers with equal sharing of child care 'more or less distance themselves from a job-centred conduct of life.' (p. 131). Involved fatherhood is not a means to pursue gender equality, but rather to fulfill personal needs. In a similar vein Helfferich (2012) finds: 'a new hegemonic masculinity is emerging – and women can also acquire that status – that is defined by mobility and not by family.' (p. 162-163). Beyond Europe Gerson (1993) found that new expectations to fatherhood guided American men 'to keep the family small' (p. 75). She notes that ideologies of gender equality are widely accepted but hard to fulfil. Men opt for a traditional breadwinner role while women opt for autonomy (Gerson 2010).<sup>4</sup> What these studies convey is that gender equality and fertility have different implications for men and women. Examining Norwegian studies Holter (2012) points to the need of analyzing changes in men's roles separately from gender equality as dissimilar fields. To women gender equality may represent a 'plus factor', while to men it may represent a 'minus factor' (p. 273).

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<sup>3</sup> For example, in Norway 19 % of men age 34-39 did not live with children, compared to 10 % of women in the same age group. In France the proportions were 24 and 12 %, and in Germany-West 35 and 25 % respectively.

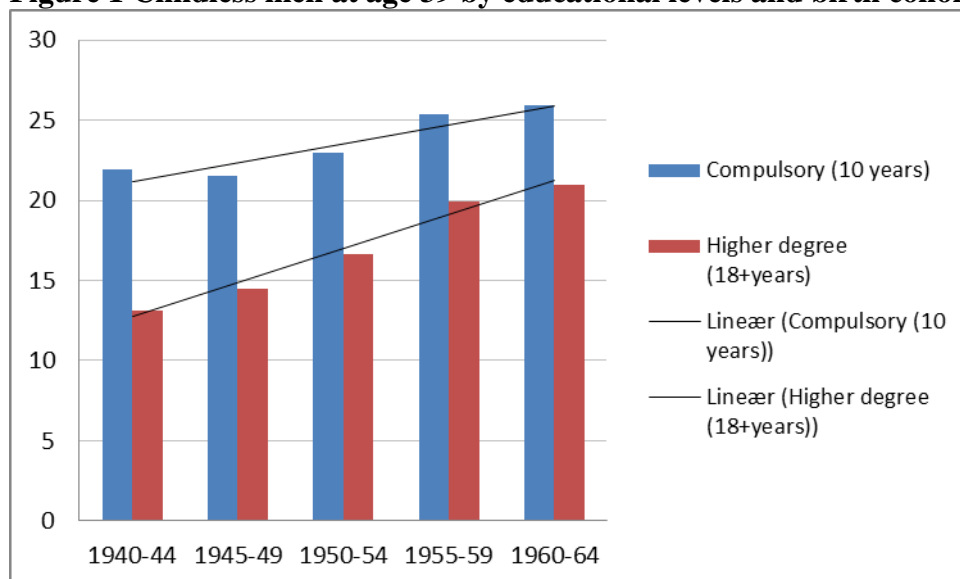
<sup>4</sup> This picks up Granovetter's point that norms and values do not correspond to behavior.

## The Norwegian context

Gender equality has been a long-standing policy goal which is also widely embraced in the population. The country has been at the top of the Human Development Index since its start in 1980<sup>5</sup> and is used as an example of the positive relationship between gender equality and fertility. Fertility increased from a low point by the mid-1980s (TFR 1,68) to a peak in 2009 (TFR 1,98) followed by a slight decline (TFR 1,85 in 2012). Paradoxically, during the same period childlessness among men has grown. One in four men (26,5%) do not have children by age 40 and this does not change much for the older men (22,2% at age 45 and 20,3% at age 50) (Statistics Norway, 2013). This represents a strong increase while among women childlessness is much lower (14%) with little change over time.

Kravdal and Rindfuss (2008) examined the relationship between fertility and education among Norwegian women and men born 1940 to 1964. They found a shift in the relationship between fertility and education among women and suggested that family policies may have reduced the wage penalty of motherhood.

**Figure 1 Childless men at age 39 by educational levels and birth cohorts. %. Norway.**



*Based upon Kravdal and Rindfuss, 2008, Table 3.*

<sup>5</sup> <http://hdrstats.undp.org/en/countries/profiles/NOR.html>

Among men childlessness has increased in both educational groups, but most so among the highest educated, from 13 to 21 % (see also Rønsen and Skrede, 2010, Figure 5).

Childlessness has remained higher among men with low education but the highest educated seem to 'catch-up'. Among women, childlessness was, and still is, most prevalent among the highest educated but in contrast to this group of men, the trend is downward (from 25% to 20%, Table 3).

These trends have evolved in a period of increasing acceptance of gender equality and with rising attention towards active fatherhood. Three explanations, not excluding one another, are possible. First, as suggested by Kravdal and Rindfuss that '*... better educated women may be in a position to attract partners who are more willing to equitable share these [household AMJ comment] tasks.*' (p. 869). Second, rising childlessness might be linked to demands to fatherhood. Third, personal networks may have distinct impact on fertility among men and women. I shall search for possible differences in networks by giving particular attention to childless men.

## **Methodology**

The data source stems from the qualitative project The Social Meaning of Children. In this project 90 Norwegian women and men in their prime reproductive life phase (primarily between 25 to 35 years) were interviewed about having children. An important aim of the research was to understand the processes towards parenthood. What ideas about childbearing could be traced; whether and how, the issue was discussed in couples, and whether childbearing was a topic discussed in personal networks of friends and others.

The sample design was to search for equal shares of women and men, parents and childless, at the two extreme points of the class-ladder (upper middle and working class). Parents should not have a child (or a youngest) older than two years.

Data were collected during spring 2010 in Oslo (the capital) and Trondheim (third largest city). The respondents, 46 women and 44 men, were in the desired age groups with a couple exceptions. Forty-eight respondents had children while 42 were childless, among them 25 men<sup>6</sup> and 17 women. Upper middle class included professional occupations requiring MA

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<sup>6</sup> Two men had pregnant partners. They are counted among the childless because they have (not yet) experiences as fathers.

level education, 24 women and 22 men.<sup>7</sup> The respondents in working class occupations included lower service class or manual occupations requiring no formal education beyond upper secondary level, 22 women and 22 men.<sup>8</sup>

A semi-structured guide in three versions was developed: for people with children, for those without and for those who did not want children. The interview guide included a time-line where respondents marked personal events (partnerships, children etc.) on one side of the line, and education and employment histories on the other side. Furthermore respondents were asked to fill in a network map, divided into three circles from the most important to the more distant relationships. They were asked to indicate number and ages of children for the persons mapped. No restrictions were put on the kind of people they could include. The map functioned as a starting point for conversations on children in their networks.

Recruitment within this framework was demanding and men without children represented a specific challenge. A folder explaining the main ideas of the project was distributed. We looked people up randomly, visited working places and used snowballing. During fieldwork we could be surprised by discovering that a 'willing' person deviated from our criteria in ways not foreseen, but which enriched our experiences. For example, midway in the interview of an upper middle class man, after having described in detail how much he wanted a child, I asked for his reaction if he met a woman who did not want a child. He answered: *'Well ...okay ... just to tell you, I am homosexual, so ...I would not fall in love with a woman.'* [laughter] (P11). Another time, after having asked students in a lecture if they knew about 'a handyman', one student came forward and told that her partner had this kind of work. The 'handyman' turned out to be a woman (P3). The elaborated child desire of the upper class man came to stand in contrast to the ambivalence among many other men, while the 'handyman' conveyed how lesbian couples in her network had convinced her (and her partner) that they too could have children.

Occasionally when recruiting through snow-balling it was not always easy to locate working class respondents. For example a waiter turned out to have mid-ways university studies and worked part-time as journalist, and an alternative health instructor had a year at the university

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<sup>7</sup> Upper middle class occupations included architect, biologist, medical doctor, economist, educator, engineer, journalist, psychologist, researcher, business consultant, innovator, lawyer, and musician.

<sup>8</sup> Working class occupations included cook, waitress, decorator, gardener, graphic assistant, hair dresser, kinder garden assistant, sales person, secretary, shop clerk, social educator, store manager, ware house worker, bar keeper, carpenter, drafts man, driver, electrician, janitor, untrained journalist, lock smith and plumber.

followed by long-term travelling. Some aspects could pop up as a surprise during the interview but these were exceptions.

Informants were explained the aim of the research project, and their options to withdraw at any time. All interviews were tape recorded, transcribed and entered into ATLAS.ti, as were, time-lines and network maps. An open coding procedure was employed (Keim et al. 2009).

I use personal networks as my site of analyses and define these broadly in accordance with Bernardi (2003). Mische's (2011) concept of *social influence* is useful to see how childless observes changes in friends' lives after having children. Moreover Rossier and Bernardi's (2009) concept of *social learning* is useful to examine how friends' may talk about having children. Are children an issue men and women talk about with friends? Is childbearing impacted through personal networks and if so, is there a gender difference?

### **Analysis**

A first examination of the network maps revealed that gender differences were evident. Dividing the networks into those with 'many' children (five or more) and those with 'few' (less than five) showed that women more often put down 'many' children while men noted fewer. Networks of upper class women are the most 'child rich' while working class men are those with fewest children. Moreover, while women typically have wide networks of close friends, sisters, colleagues and people in different leisure activities men typically put down fewer persons and among these family members dominate (parents, siblings).

A next observation was that only one person, a man (P86), chose the 'not-wanting-child' version of the interview guide (P86). As it turned out even he was no longer so sure. He had agreed with his partner not to have children but now, after three years of cohabiting she was about to change her mind. The overwhelming disregard of our 'not-wanting-children'-guide sent a signal that children remain normative in the Norwegian context, despite the growing proportion of childless men. From this we might assume that childlessness is a result from life events resulting in no children rather than a decision from the start. However, it might also reflect that it is not perceived as acceptable to state that you do not want children, maybe in particular to researchers studying 'the social meaning of children'. Still, the conditions for entering fatherhood as well as the reflections on children reveal a wide variation in the strength of the child desire.



I shall start the analysis with men without children. They are all at the end of their twenties and early thirties. According to the Norwegian birth register 2012<sup>9</sup> this is the peak ages for men to have children. Among all children born in 2010, 54 per cent had a father aged between 25 to 34 years and only 13 per cent were born to a father older than 40 years.

I will distinguish between men in the upper middle class and those in the working class. An important reason is the marked difference in relationship status in the two classes. Among the 25 men without children, 15 belonged to the upper middle class and 10 to the working class. The majority of the upper middle class (9 out of 15) lived with a partner, some for several years, and among them were the two men expecting their first child. Six lived as single, three of them with a recent break-up from long-standing relationships. In sharp contrast the 10 working class men were primarily single. Only two lived in cohabitation, both for a few years. The remaining eight lived without a partner; four indicated that they had 'casual' relationships while one had a break-up from a long standing relationship. Three had a recent 'sweetheart'.

We do not find support for a growing desire for a childless life among these men. Similar to other men their motives for wanting children include joy in life, less egoism, changes in life focus, strengthening of conjugal bonds, and continuation of one's genes, of one's own flesh and blood, and less loneliness in old age. Moving beyond the norm, however, revealed that the strength of desires for children varies, as does the role of networks in having children. To illustrate some features of how these two groups of men reflect on children I will start with some examples from single upper class men.

***'Last years there was a sudden landslide': Upper middle class men without partners***

The first case is a founder (P51) close to his 30ies. He started an IT company with a four friends some years ago. They work up to 60 or 70 hours per week and the economic gain is still limited. He wants to have a child but not strongly expressed: *'Yes, I believe so.'* There is no time for children, yet. His identity lies with his work. None of the five colleagues have children while one is married. This is described as a potential threat: *'One issue is the economics for the company; the other is that we lose an essential part of what we sell, namely our heads, for a period. And that must be substituted, which is not so simple.'* Childbearing

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<sup>9</sup> <http://www.fhi.no/dav/89e8f69449.pdf>

has recently started among other friends and now they *'have children the whole gang'*. This fact has no impact: *'No, not really.'* His 'childless' environment at work is what matters. Does he think that children will add something to his life? He answers: *'... life will have another aspect, that is the "father's role", which presumably will take some place from other aspects ... but this is a role for which I feel there is much respect in society.'* But does he think he will miss something by not having a child? *'yes and no, I don't know. In the short term the impact will be minor. ... I will live in the single- or 'couple-without children-bubble'.* In the long run he visions that he may miss having children to follow up in older age. He does not see a child as status enhancing for himself but believe that there is an expectation to having children in society: *'at least as long as you are in a couple relationship.'* The founder protects himself from social pressure by not having a stable relationship to a woman. He is not alone to have such a strategy.

Another man, also a founder (P64), expresses it like this: *'It (his company, AMJ) is my other lady now.'* He is a couple of years younger and has two broken relationships behind him but the issue of children was not raised in any of them. Work was what counted. To be a founder cannot be combined with having children, he states. To have children, you need time and: *'I don't have it now.'* He observes how other people he knows: *'juggle very much with working hours and kids and no time for leisure. I value my leisure time, doing funny things...more than my urge to have children, in the near future. ... hence [small laughter] just to have more leisure time, and no responsibility for another human being is what I want for a time ahead.'* He has no close friends with children *'No, in fact, among the friends I have, and who I see often, no one have children.'* He does not see children as status enhancing since a child can be produced by chance and consequently *'They do not acquire a "status star" in my book if they manage to make a child.'* [laughing]

To some men freedom and leisure time count most. P69 works in an international enterprise. His friends have started having children and *'last years there was a sudden landslide.'* He has: *'never talked directly about having children with friends'* but modifies this because in talking with a female friend *'having children may enter as a secondary subject.'* Despite a clear *'Yess!'* to wanting children it is the limitations on his lifestyle that come forward. With a child there will be less room for spontaneous week-end trips, he will be tied down, would have to cut down on social activities he is now enjoying and could not go to exotic places for

work if the boss wanted to send him: *'the way I live now, I feel free.'* However, by remaining childless he thinks other people may think that *'something is lacking.'* This man observes friends as they become fathers and: *'some of them manage to adjust fine, and take their time to nurse old friendships, while others, they .... become absorbed.'* He meets with friends primarily without children, after bedtime. His own desire for children did not change as his friends became fathers, but it still made him feel a bit *'lagging behind.'*

While the men above are aware that friends become fathers P60 is not. He is well into his 30ies and was surprised when making the network map and finding that most of his closest friends had children: *'I have never thought about that. That all of those close to me have children'*. He thinks that one reason for this is that he *'now as I am single, hanging around with other people, who you do not meet as a couple.'* He is positive to have a child but: *'I have anyway not thought that "Oh, I want a child too", I have not. ... No, I don't think so.'*

These men may receive hints from friends about finding a partner while having a child is not an issue. However, most men in upper class live with a partner and they are exposed to different networks than bachelors.

#### ***'Time to move in that direction': Upper middle class men with partners***

Confronted with other couples' discussions about children men with partners are more likely to be exposed to a social pressure. Several have lived with the partner for many years and find themselves in a zone where children are the issue. Since female partners in general are younger than the men, and also have a shorter reproductive period, her friends are more likely to have children than his as expressed by P6: *'all her friends have started to have children, and it feels like we are at a standstill. ... I think it is she who is somewhat more eager to have a child than I am, I have to say. Just now.'*

The ages around 30ies are when her friends start having children. Those remaining childless are reminded that *'it is about time'* P68 notes. He and his partner are both in permanent employment with regular working hours, a sound economy and a long-standing relationship. They have not been much in contact with children and: *'there is no pressing need, or wish from our side. Rather I think we are approaching a phase when we asking ourselves "what do we do now"?' We think that ... it's time to move in that direction.'* However, they do not want to disclose that they have started the move. However they have decided to wait until their friends' 30 years celebrations are over as these might become suspicious if she abstains from

a glass of red wine. It is through observing *'the kind of pattern that we start thinking that maybe it is about time.'* In this case everything is 'in place' and the social pressure more than personal desire that eventually may lead them to have a child.

Alcohol is a marker of pregnancy as health authorities in Norway strongly emphasises the negative impact on the foetus. The couple above is not the only one referring to this as a way of disclosing intentions to have a child. P25 tells about his mother-in-law, longing for a grandchild, conveying disappointment when his partner takes a glass of wine to the dinner. However, this pressure has no impact. Neither is there any pressure from friends: *'Absolutely not. Rather to the contrary. They think I should not have children now, but wait.'*

Some couples may agree to have children but circumstances are not in place. P13 has cohabited for several years. Both are ready for children *'what is holding us back is our working situation'*. He is freelancer, she is job-seeking. When asked if friends had an impact on his own child desire he reflects: *'Yes, I guess, a little. If there were no children in my inner circle, I would maybe not give children much thought. It has some influence. I guess. Like ... "everybody has children why shouldn't [I- AMJ]" ... It is very natural to have children, one assumes'*. He admits to watching his friends but this couple seems primarily to be driven by their own child-desire.

But there are also cases where ambivalence is manifest like P50. He is close to his 30ies and has lived with his partner for years. He tells, with some unease, that a child: *'is quite near in future but at the same time we are not exactly there yet. ... I have a feeling of not being quite adult enough.'* The 'child question' occupies a large place in their everyday life: *'we are thinking over and again and long into the future. ... It is not an issue if I will have children or not, I will, but I am giving myself time and space to reflect over this and finding out "does it feel right now" – "or maybe now"?' ... This is about my own feelings towards job identity.'* He associates children with *'less flexibility and less freedom in some ways...'* When asked about children in his network he first answers *'it is about 50-50'* and continues: *'On my partner' side it is mostly couples, on my side it is 'friends' and they are primarily childless.'* It was his partner who brought up the 'child-question': *'It was her. Definitely'*. Having a 'free choice' creates problems as to when to start. Without a child *'something would be lacking.'* They are godparents to a new-born child to friends and this has spurred their own discussions: *'... during the last period we have been a lot with them. It is very special. It is very special'*

*with small children. So this clearly has an impact.* 'What is at stake is the timing. He does not feel ready, she is in a hurry.

The notion of 'something lacking' suggests that children are associated with status, a matter mentioned by more men. P24 is clear on this: *'Yes, you don't want to be lesser. ... maybe, if you see the whole gang entering a new phase, you will join them. ... you ... well, you interact with people having children and want to be part of the gang, or how I would say this'*. He *'wants to be a good father.'* Watching friends, this man becomes *'a little inspired'*. His partner, older than him, is under education and he is not conveying a burning desire for children. In this couple none are ready for a child yet.

While there are exceptions of men who tell that they are more eager than their partners a more common pattern is that men delay. P9 is frank about his strategy: *'My wife wanted a child sooner, and I wanted to wait. Hence, we married first.'* After years of cohabitation they had married half a year earlier. The wife was now expectant. To him marriage was a way of delaying childbearing. Few of his friends had children but most of her's had. He stated: *'It is not without reason named 'baby-boom', that is, if some start having, then others also want ... maybe it is a little bit of pressure. To make a successful family. To do what others do.'* By becoming a father he expects his life to change because *'it is children who make the rules.'* Other men tell about a more direct pressure. In the words of P79, a recent father who had lived with his partner for more than a decade: *'Ye-e-es, like that, "Shouldn't you two have a child now" and "When will it happen?" It was quite like that'*. Couples around them became parents, until *'by now it is about everyone, just now, at least [laughing].'* He continued: *'It was very motivating watching friends becoming parents. I have to say so. It was easy to imagine yourself being fine as a parent as well.'* This man makes a clear reference to the personal network as an inspiration to follow-up. But such an inspiration runs more frequently through the female partner's than his network.

Time and again men said there was *'a rush, where half of her friends had got a child and she wanted very much to have a child too'* P27, an upper class father told: *'...there is a pressure ... and in particular from female friends, I think. Women are bad in this way. They want, in a way ... to follow each other, and would like to have children as close as possible in ages, I think. Then there are comrades, but here pressure is more like ... it is as, well just to get it*

*over with, do it now, instead of delaying. Because it [the pressure. AMJ] will not lessen'. We may ask if a child can be the price of upholding the relationship.*

Children are not a matter to be discussed with male friends. Hints may be made like P41 tells: *'... when you have ... pals who all have children, and I go hunting with them, and they ask "OK, what about you, are you going to have a baby soon?" like that... and colleagues as well ... about the same.'* This was an exceptional case where the man felt a pressure from his own network. As hunters they spent days together on a regular basis. One by one they were fathers and pressure increased on the one lagging behind.

**Summing up:** A distinct line runs between bachelors on the one hand, and men living with partners on the other. For some bachelors a break-up has put the child-question on wait while others seem to remain single in order to avoid pressure. The latter groups perceive a child as a distraction not only from building up a career but also from enjoying leisure activities. They watch that friends are less available and more distant as fathers. Men with partners have entered a zone where pressure intensifies. In this group a network influence is clearly demonstrated and stems from the partner's network primarily. As her friends start having children the child-question is activated. Also the men see children as something belonging to a family, but the 'right timing' can be difficult. None of the upper middle class men make direct references to gender equality. But several see children as a loss of freedom. The mechanisms among working class men suggest distinct paths to fatherhood.

***'Very, very sure, but not now': Working class men without children***

While upper middle class men were divided by their partnerships, for the working class men the division runs by fatherhood. Among the ten men in this group the majority (eight) are single. Men in the working class do not question the normative system of having children, but children do not occupy their centre stage in social life. Right now I am *'very single'* P36 tells. He wants to have children *'but not yet. ... Very, very sure, but not now'*. He refers to *'the thirties are the new twenties'* suggesting that the time for children will be after the 40ies. He has plenty of time as: *'all my good memories, they have happened after the twenties. From then and until now, there have been lots of friends and dinners and travels.'* But he is working sixteen hours per day and has not taken a holiday for the last three years. As a future father he does not vision himself to be the one to feed the baby and change napkins and assumes that a

future wife will love a child more than him. He is not the only man in this group to express that gender equality is not his cup of tea.

P15 is much in line with this. He makes the reference to the child-free life style into the 40ies. He is now in his mid-30ies and appreciates having a friend, who is childless like himself, since, *'Then I don't need to stress [laughing]. Now I am "okeeey"'*. When asked what kind of stress, he specifies *'finding a woman'*. A woman may restrict his life since: *'As far as I have heard it is the ladies who decide.'* [laughing]. He observed that more of his friends have children and feels there is much to lose: *'you see, I have turned into such a football man, and I am sure I could not sit at a pub watching Champions League, like I did yesterday, together with my lads'* [laughing]. He appreciates his long-term bachelor life-style. He wants to have children but is not yet ready.

Several working class men tell that friends become less available after fatherhood, like P18 when pointing to a friend in his network map: *'I have not seen this one as often as we used to. We the pals used to hang together very much, all the time. ... We did things, went to work-out, café, ... parties.'* When the friend had a child he could: *'not join us all the time, like the rest of us.'* Unlike the two fist men, this one was ready for a child. He was utterly bitter because his partner had left him. P34 also seems to be left behind. He has made and *'a lot of mess'* in his life. He wants to have children but tells that he cannot even take care of himself. He has no close friends with children; thinks no one expects him to have a child and do not talk to anyone about this. To him children are a sign of success in life: *'to demonstrate that you can also make it outside your workplace'*. Also P49 states with a slight laughter: *'I have not found any who wants me, yet.'* These cases suggest that they have lost out at the partner-market.

Still some of these men are ready for fatherhood. P75 tells that he is *'clucky'*. He is in his mid-twenties and has a sweetheart for a few months. They have not discussed the matter other than jokingly. To P88, in his thirties has lived shortly with his partner and: *'everything is in place'*. He thinks it will be nice to have a child and has no ambitions in his job wanting to *'continue in the level I am at now'*. But when asked for details about his child desire he is vague: *'I don't know exactly. It's just something I feel.'* Single men in working class have different reasons for not having a child. Some indicate that gender equality is not their future vision; some convey a story of not succeeding at the partner-market, while there are also those ready for fatherhood. But none of them express a burning desire. To men in this group a long period

of living with a partner and no children is unusual. Rather, partnership and children are part of a package.

### ***'Then it just happened': Working class men with children***

Fatherhood is not necessarily planned. P74 stated: *'Amor in drunkenness, you see. [laughing] But afterwards I did take responsibility. [...] I wanted a child, of course'*. He and his partner are in their early 20s. To many working class fathers children are a 'fact of life'. But the circumstances for fatherhood may differ and even if there is a clear ideal that both partners should agree to have a child, reality may prove different. To P82, in his 30ies, his child was a surprise. His partner had, *'yes, she talked about it very often, she did. She talked about getting a child all the time. I said it is not the time yet.'* But when her sister had a baby, *'then it just happened.'* His first reaction was: *'... how the hell could this happen? How is it possible? ... Then it appeared that she had forgotten [the pill. AMJ] ... I was a bit - 'forgotten'? I thought it was strange and was very suspicious. [...] hm-m- I don't know'*. His desire to wait until later was confronted with his partner's going along. Even if circumstances can be contrary to visions, the result can be good as P2 tells. He used to think that *'I should never have a, what I name a 'ready-package'. Yes, a woman with a child, to say it in another way. ... But this is what happened, nevertheless. Hence I had to switch it, and renamed it a 'start-package'*. His fatherhood was not planned: *'not at all'*, as he says. But the child is the best thing that has ever happened to him.

***Summing up:*** Working class men without children are likely to be single. They may have casual relationships are casual; and they may see children, but more so a woman, as a restriction their life style is. In this group there are men who are dropped, or have failed at the partner-market. They observe that friends become fathers and react with ambiguity. Their social life depends on others staying 'behind'. Men with partners are likely also to be fathers. Pregnancies are often not planned but a child is seldom questioned. Fertility is not a topic to be discussed man to man. For both groups of men women are the drivers in having children.

### ***Women's stories***

Many men in both classes designate their partner's network as exerting a pressure on them for having children. Women confirm this (explored in more details in Jensen 2013). A first child is spurred by (and may spur) close, female friends or a sister, who are (or may become) mothers.



Women in the upper middle class spoke about friends having children in a wave, like P73 who had lived with her partner for almost fifteen years. Her friends had *'more and more [children. AMJ], actually a real boom right now.'* [laughs] The couple used to socialize with other childless people. Now they have shifted mainly towards people with children: *'It has something to do with the tempo ... and the same kind of understanding, or, yes, tolerance for things being a bit so and so.'* Others, like P78, say friends' childbearing is *'infectious! Yes, obviously, it is infecting you, clearly. I know incredibly many who are now at home with a child'*. Sometimes close friends have children at the same time, like P16 who tells the three friends did not plan this *'But I think we all knew it ... [laughs]'*. It was *'in the air'*. Having children of similar ages meant *'enormously much for the friendship. ... We had much in common already, but now we have even more. In a way we can share experiences.'* This woman is explicit on the exchange of experiences of coping with babies between the friends. While childless men may observe friends as fathers, often with ambiguity, to women friends are a source of social learning as mothers.

Children may be seen as part of friendships even long before childbearing as described by P46: *'That you can go pram-pushing together ... and ... have friends in the same situation ... and who are in the same rhythm as one self. We have talked about that. And also, of course, it is nice to have children at the same age who can later be friends'*. Children signify a similarity in life styles which link women together as mothers.

Few working-class women questioned having children, as P1, in her mid-20ies. She has no children and says: *'what else is there to do? ... Children are [my. AMJ] life in future'*. P39 has two closely spaced children from different fathers. None of them were planned, but *'I always wanted children'*. Her children have changed her life perspective and given her life energy, she told us. She was still in her early twenties, and most of her friends, she counts eight, had children. She was the first one, but now: *'It is just as if more dare when they see others having children ... It is strange actually ... but when seeing others having, they want to too ... '*

Also P32 became pregnant without planning. For a couple of weeks she was in doubt what to do but when she told her boyfriend that: *'... that we will have the baby, you are going to be a father – this he has told me later was the most fantastic he had ever heard.'* However, they broke-up shortly after the child was born. Nevertheless, as a single mother she uses the word

'fantastic' over and over again in describing how her life improved by having the baby. She no longer felt she had much in common with her best female friend, who was uninterested in children.

A recurring theme among working class women is that a child is *'part of the package'*. P76 tells that she strongly wanted a child, even though she was not *'... a baby person... I am not the first to haul myself over a new born baby'*. In her nearest network circle there had been a sudden wave of children. Despite not being a *'baby person'*, her social life became completely centred on children. Relationships with childless friends were questioned, as she had told them that they were welcome to visit, *'even if we have a child.'*

Women tell that friendships are linked more closely together through children. But they also tell that friendships with childless friends can be questioned. Children are social glue, but can also divide friends who no longer share a common meaning structure.

## **Discussion**

Personal networks among men do not typically include children. In networks of childless men children hold a very modest place. These men observe friends as they become fathers and experience that they are absorbed into fatherhood. Some may be 'a little inspired' by watching friends as fathers while the fear of losing freedom is widespread. They find that their friends after fatherhood are less available for leisure activities. Talks about having children are seldom. There may be hints, or jokes, in particular from those who are fathers but beyond that children do not loom large in their social life. They do not socialize in circles of couples with children. Some tell that they move with other kind of people after a break-up. Through making the network maps some realize, with surprise, that most friends have children. They are likely to meet them without the presence of these.

Distinct patterns for discussion on childbearing are traced in personal networks for men with and without partners. This distinction follows a class line. The combination of partnerships and no children was class specific and prevalent in the upper middle class. These men are exposed to increasing pressure from their female partners, infrequent phenomena in the working class where partnerships and children are part of the same package. Men in childless unions are exposed to increasing pressure as their partners approached the 30ies and for this pressure the partner's network has a vital role. In contrast to this childless men in the working class were bachelors. In contrast to women friends play a minor role for fertility among men.

Their actual fertility behaviour is more likely to be impacted by networks of a female partner than their own friends.

Only upper-class men refer to a conflict between career and fatherhood while in both classes some specify leisure, some point to a loss of autonomy by submission to women or children as 'setting the rules'. Many men hesitate, postpone or are surprised by the first child but despite ambivalence, children are a sign of fulfilment. At the end of the day, children are wanted and expected, but seldom experienced as a strong drive.

### **Conclusion:**

Leading demographers see gender equality as a precondition for turning the very low fertility in Europe. Norway is a much used example for this turn; mothers are employed and fathers are 'involved'. This study has examined the paradox of rising fertility and fewer fathers in this country. Childbearing remains a 'female matter'.

While fertility often is analysed as an individual choice, this paper examines the place of children in personal networks. Granovetter's (1978) threshold levels seem relevant to understand the timing of childbearing as 'most prefer to wait until other people have tried it first' (Valente 1996). Respondents demonstrate how personal networks are 'pipelines' of social influence and learning (Mische 2011; Bernardi 2003), but more so among women than men. Children create a new form of meaning structure (Fuhse 2009). They glue friends together but may also demobilize friendships. While friends are lost into fatherhood for men, children are at the centre stage of friendships as women become mothers. Men are absorbed into their partner's personal networks, while women strengthen the bonds to friends with children about the same age. Where childless men meet fathers without their children, young mothers seek together with their children.<sup>10</sup> A strong gender distinction appears in the ways in which men and women are exposed to social influence and –learning on having children...

Despite rising childlessness in Norway men and women share a normative system where children are 'a normal part of life' (Lutz et al. 2006: 188). It is the behaviour and social environments that vary. The eagerness, reasons for and readiness for children are weaker among men than women. For sure, several men in this analysis will, or may, have children at

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<sup>10</sup> In Norway it is a common sight that young mothers are tram-pushing as a group while young 'daddy-leave' fathers push the baby carriage alone. There are now public efforts to promote groupings also among men.

a later stage. However, they are the basin from which the growing number of childless Norwegian men is recruited.

The paradox I have tried to understand is the combination of a relatively high fertility along with rising levels of childlessness among men in 'gender-equal' Norway. A strong gender distinction is detected in the way personal networks are centred on children with a tinier place of children in the life of the 'under-forties' (Ariès 1985) among men than women. The timing of childbearing has many consequences for fertility trends and gender equality. On the one hand family policies may enable women to fulfil their child desire even if men are reluctant. If so, a challenge to child welfare may follow. On the other hand if men proceed in putting off children also beyond their 40ies, the age differences of parents may widen. If so, a challenge to gender equality may follow.

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