

# Timing Parenthood

Independence, Family and Ideals of Life

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# Contents

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	4
<b>1. SITUATING FERTILITY</b>	<b>6</b>
<b>Fertility and reproductive decision-making</b>	<b>8</b>
<i>The fertility transition</i>	9
<i>The second fertility transition</i>	10
<b>The Swedish context</b>	<b>11</b>
<i>Swedish family politics since the 1970s</i>	11
<i>Employment</i>	12
<i>Gender and age, geographies and education</i>	15
<b>2. SITUATING LIVES: THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b>	<b>18</b>
<b>Social influence and the value of parenthood</b>	<b>18</b>
<i>Social influence</i>	19
<i>Implications of parenthood</i>	19
<i>The value of parenthood</i>	21
<b>Motherhood and fatherhood – family and independence</b>	<b>22</b>
<i>Women and men – mothers and fathers</i>	23
<i>Family and the intimate relationship</i>	31
<i>The (in)dependent individual</i>	34
<b>3. METHODOLOGY</b>	<b>38</b>
<b>Analytical perspectives</b>	<b>38</b>
<i>Anthropological demography and a social constructionist perspective</i>	38
<i>Poststructuralist influences</i>	39
<i>Discourse and subject positioning</i>	42
<b>Aim of study</b>	<b>48</b>
<i>'Family and working life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'</i>	48
<i>Research questions</i>	48
<b>The focus group data</b>	<b>49</b>
<i>Composition</i>	49
<i>Conduct</i>	53
<i>Themes and discourses</i>	59

<b>4. THE IDEAL LIFE COURSE</b>	<b>61</b>
<b>Life before parenthood</b>	<b>62</b>
<i>The self-fulfilling phase of independence</i>	63
<i>Studies and work</i>	69
<b>Negotiating life course and age</b>	<b>70</b>
<i>To 'live life': a rule more than an option</i>	70
<i>Parenthood and age, adulthood and youth</i>	73
<b>Entering parenthood and sustaining normalcy</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>83</b>
<b>5. BEING READY, SECURE AND MATURE</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Being ready and secure</b>	<b>89</b>
<i>Work, income and material standard</i>	89
<i>Age and the risk of infertility</i>	95
<b>Feeling ready and mature</b>	<b>98</b>
<i>An immanent drive and evolving feeling</i>	99
<i>Social influence</i>	109
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>113</b>
<b>6. HAVING A CHILD TOGETHER: LOVE AND FAMILY</b>	<b>118</b>
<b>The child as a mutual project</b>	<b>119</b>
<i>Finding the right partner</i>	119
<i>Motherhood, fatherhood and mutual responsibilities</i>	122
<b>The nuclear family ideal</b>	<b>128</b>
<i>Risking separation</i>	130
<i>Responsible parenthood</i>	133
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>7. STRAINS AND GAINS</b>	<b>140</b>
<b>Costs of parenthood</b>	<b>142</b>
<i>A restraining life</i>	142
<i>Good enough parent</i>	149
<b>Benefits of parenthood</b>	<b>152</b>
<i>A changed focus and a progressing life</i>	153
<i>Old age security and kinship ties</i>	155
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>158</b>
<b>8. TO CHANGE AND NOT TO CHANGE</b>	<b>163</b>
<b>Change and continuity</b>	<b>164</b>
<i>Embracing and rejecting change</i>	165
<i>Focusing on oneself and focusing on the child</i>	170

<b>Positioned to change and experiencing change</b>	<b>176</b>
<i>Positioned to change</i>	176
<i>Experiencing change</i>	178
<b>Discussion</b>	<b>181</b>
<b>9. CONCLUDING DISCUSSION</b>	<b>185</b>
<b>A qualitative study of reproductive decision-making</b>	<b>185</b>
<i>Discourse and conduct</i>	186
<i>Understanding and rewriting the self</i>	187
<b>Timing parenthood and ideals of life</b>	<b>188</b>
<i>Individualization and the public self</i>	190
<i>Standard parenthood, standard lives</i>	194
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>202</b>
<b>APPENDIX: FOCUS GROUP COMPOSITION</b>	<b>220</b>

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Disa

# 1

## Situating fertility

The work on the present study began in 2002, at a time when Swedish politicians and researchers for some years had shown increasing concerns about what were regarded as low birth rates. Reports from the government, Statistics Sweden and the National Social Insurance Board, such as *Barnafödandet i focus* (Fertility in focus) (Departementserien 2001), *Why so few children?* (Statistics Sweden 2001a), and *Why aren't more children born in Sweden?* (The National Social Insurance Board 2000) are examples of how declining fertility rates were presented as a problem on the political agenda. In the beginning of the 1990s, Sweden had been famous for comparatively high birth rates in the Western world, but then fertility dropped rapidly. Declining fertility and increasing mean age for first-time parents were common characteristics in the Western world at this time (Bongaarts 2002), and politicians and researchers in Sweden pondered why the birth rates did not increase concurrently with the up-going economic trend. Sweden, however, has a historical pattern of wavering birth rates. In the 1930s, Sweden had the lowest fertility in the world, but only a couple of Western countries had higher birth rates at the beginning of the 1990s (Hoem and Hoem 1997a). Swedish fertility then dropped, up to the latest turn of the century, only to slowly begin to increase again. As it appears, the upward trend continues (Statistics Sweden 2007c), but there are indications that this is due to the general postponement of parenthood in the 1990s (Andersson 2004; Bongaarts 2002). That is, men and women deferred the transition and started to enter parenthood at an older age, as also occurred in other Western countries (Bongaarts 2002).

In present-day Sweden, the debate about low fertility is not as apparent as it was in the beginning of the decade, perhaps partly because

birth rates have increased. In 2005, period fertility was up to 1.77<sup>1</sup> (Statistics Sweden 2007c). Studies of Swedish cohort fertility show that Swedish women had an average of two children in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, although the total fertility rates were fluctuating. An average of 2.1 children per woman is required for a population to be stable in numbers, which means that the Swedish population would have decreased had there been no immigration in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Statistics Sweden 2002a). Most Western countries of today are witnessing sub-replacement period fertility, which alarms politicians and inspires a great deal of demographic research.

The present thesis is a qualitative study on reproductive decision-making. The main goal is to look at how Swedish young adults understand and picture the timing of parenthood and to “situate fertility” (Greenhalgh 1995) in accordance with Greenhalgh’s recommendations. I look upon procreative decisions as embedded in the social, cultural, economic and political context in which the individual acts. This means that the present study on the timing of parenthood includes notions on what constitutes a good life, good parenthood, an auspicious childhood, and a normal self, and that political, economic and social contexts are regarded.

The present work is part of a larger project, ‘Family and working life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century’, in which Eva Bernhardt is the principal investigator.<sup>2</sup> The project consists of a quantitative and qualitative part, and the main goal is to broaden our understandings of young adults’ attitudes and values regarding family formation (Bernhardt 2002). The present work is the result of the qualitative part, in which focus group interviews were

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<sup>1</sup> Period fertility, also known as the Total Fertility Rate (TFR), is the most commonly used and presented measurement of fertility in a given country at a given time. It is common to include the TFR in official statistics and to present the yearly rate as an indication of whether birth rates go up or down. In Sweden, for instance, the TFR in 1991 was 2.1 children per woman, and the TFR in 1999 was 1.5 (Statistics Sweden 2002b). An additional way to calculate fertility is to measure average fertility in a certain cohort of women or men at the end of their childbearing years, which is to look at the *completed fertility rate* (CFR), or cohort fertility. Important to notice is that the TFR is a “hypothetical measure”; “the CFR does have the considerable advantage of being an unambiguous and real measure of fertility, while the more up-to-date period TFR is a hypothetical measure that is subject to bias and hence potential misinterpretation” (Bongaarts 2002: 421). I will henceforth refer to period fertility when talking about fertility rates and fertility patterns of different sorts, unless otherwise specified.

<sup>2</sup> The project was funded by the Swedish Council for Working Life and Social Research, research grant number 2001-4022.

conducted. Reasoning about the timing of parenthood, notions of parenthood and possible enticements and hesitations regarding parenthood saturated the focus group discussions, and provided rich data on notions and ideals related to reproductive decision-making. The following discussion aims at introducing the reader to historical and contemporary fertility patterns and the ways in which previous studies have connected certain patterns of proactive behaviour to societal changes and contexts.

## **Fertility and reproductive decision-making**

It is within the demographic research field that the timing of parenthood, possible variables affecting reproductive decision-making, and fertility patterns and trends are commonly studied. Demography, as a scientific discipline, developed parallel with European nation-state formation and nationalism in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and has a history of being closely connected to politics. Fertility, mortality and migration have been considered important to study in order to, using reformative operations, try to influence demographic patterns (Hill 1997; Kreager 1997). For instance, in Sweden, at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, falling birth rates started to alarm people of the ruling classes. From their point of view, Sweden needed a good stock of manpower and soldiers, and emigration, high infant mortality and decreasing fertility were regarded as serious threats (Ohlander 1994). Several political reforms were implemented and laws were passed, aiming to secure the population stock. In 1900 the first law regarding maternity leave was passed. The law prohibited women working in factories from returning to work earlier than four weeks after the delivery. The goal was to increase breastfeeding in order to decrease infant mortality. No remittances were eligible for women on maternity leave at this time. In 1910, a law was passed to prevent access to and information about contraceptives. The political interventions, however, did not keep the fertility rates from declining further (Hatje 1974; Ohlander 1994), and what has been called the fertility transition, defined by falling birth rates, was evident in Sweden yet a couple of decades.

## *The fertility transition*

The fertility transition, also termed the demographic transition, has been noted in the Western world from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and signified a change in reproductive behaviour that caused birth rates to fall. This demographic transition included other aspects as well as declining fertility; it occurred parallel with industrialization, urbanization, mass schooling, declining infant mortality, improved health care facilities, and changing patterns of family formations (Handwerker 1986), and it changed the average family size from around six children to two. In the 1930s, the two children per family norm was established in most Western countries and birth rates continued to fall, particularly in Sweden where the ‘population question’ came to engage all political parties, intellectuals and debaters (Hatje 1974; Hoem and Hoem 1997a; Ohlander 1994). Laws and reforms were implemented, aiming to encourage people to enter parenthood and to have more children.

From the 1930s onwards, the Swedish political stance on reproductive behaviour was influenced by Gunnar and Alva Myrdal’s proposition ‘parenthood as free choice’ (Hatje 1974). In 1931 it became possible for women to apply for paid maternity leave (Ohlander 1994), and in the late 1930s, several laws were passed that were intended to facilitate parenthood. Free delivery service and health care for mothers and children, and maternity benefits for the majority of women were introduced; employers were legally prohibited from dismissing women due to marriage, pregnancy and childbirth. In Sweden, other reforms were introduced after World War II, such as free school meals and a general child allowance. Population growth was to be stimulated by increased social and economic welfare, and by political reforms that facilitated the combination of parenthood (or rather motherhood) and paid labour (Hatje 1974).

The fertility transition that evolved in the 19<sup>th</sup> century petered out in the 1940s everywhere in the Western world. Birth rates began to increase again, partly due to the general postponement of parenthood in the 1930s (Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995; Ohlander 1994). It is hard to say to what extent it was family politics that caused birth rates to rise in Sweden, but the political aim to support family formation continued. In 1955 all mothers were guaranteed three months paid maternity leave, and starting in 1963,

the remuneration was tied to the mother's previous earnings (Hoem and Hoem 1997a).

### ***The second fertility transition***

In the late 1960s a new demographic phenomenon started to appear. Survival expectancy improved year by year, and fertility rates started to fall yet again. At the beginning of the 1970s, many Western European nations had fertility rates below replacement level, and the rates have continued to decline (Coleman 1996). The general trend was that Western people deferred marriage and parenthood and that higher numbers of women entered higher education and the paid labour force. Demographers call these changes the second demographic transition, which is still affecting contemporary Western fertility (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006; Lesthaeghe and Willems 1999). Some have argued that decreasing fertility “may owe little to the direct influence of economic or political events” (Coleman 1996:ix), but is rather the consequence of changing ideas and values (Coleman 1996; Lesthaeghe and Moors 1996).

However, in a influential paper, Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) pointed out five aspects of political and economic, as well as social, change that, according to them, are particularly significant to take into account for understanding the declining birth rates in the 1970s. These aspects are: increased female labour force participation; the revolution of contraceptive methods; increased relationship instability; employment insecurity; and reduced welfare states. They argued that these aspects continue to influence the fertility patterns of today. Women have entered the paid labour market and higher education in great numbers during the past four decades; contraceptives are widespread and accessible in most countries; divorce and separation rates are high; the labour market is fluctuating and uncertain and particularly hard for young people to access; and the demands on higher education have lead to prolonged years of education. Increasing insecurities and demands have occurred parallel with cut-downs in welfare systems, and this has caused yet greater risks and costs with regard to entering parenthood. Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) suggested that these societal tendencies have resulted in low birth rates and a general deferment of parenthood (see also Hoem and Hoem 1987), although regional differences are great with Scandinavia having sustained general welfare

benefits and comparatively high birth rates (see also Hoem 2005). Others stress women's increasing control over fertility (due to 'the contraceptive revolution') and women gaining equal access to education and paid work as being the main reasons for decreasing fertility (see e.g. Hakim 2003).

In Sweden, the decreasing birth rates at the beginning of the second demographic transition were soon followed by a rise in fertility, and in 1990, Swedish fertility rates were among the highest in Western Europe (Statistics Sweden 2003a). Many researchers and politicians, in Sweden and internationally, applauded the Swedish welfare system, and saw Swedish family politics as the reason for the comparatively high birth rate (see e.g. Esping-Andersen 1999; Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995; Hoem 2005; Löfström 2001; McDonald 2000; Vogel 2001). Others, however, were less convinced of welfare benefits having a positive impact on the number of births. While politicians in some nations, like Sweden, have continued to promote state-funded family support, others, like those governing the US and Great Britain, have argued that family benefits primarily stimulate single parenthood, marital instability, and welfare dependency rather than fertility (Gauthier 1996).

## **The Swedish context**

### ***Swedish family politics since the 1970s***

In Sweden in the 1970s and 80s, governmental support to families increased. In the 1970s, 120.000 daycare places were created to enable women to work and the expansion of daycare facilities continued into the 1980s (Ohlander 1994). In 1974, the parental leave insurance was introduced, as one example of the gender equality ideal that has permeated Swedish family politics for more than 30 years. The parental leave gave fathers the same right as mothers to take time off work to care for the child, and the father's involvement in childcare has been politically promoted since that time (Björnberg 2004; Klinth 2002). Initially, the parental leave comprised of six months and was tied to previous earnings, with a benefit level of 90 percent of earnings, up to a ceiling. In 1975, an additional month was added, and from then on parents were entitled to use the

insurance part time, which made it possible to prolong the period of leave. The insurance was augmented and extended further in the decades to come.

Another important reform that has benefited parents with young children is the right to reduce paid working hours by up to 25 percent (in any job). This reform was introduced in 1979 and is still in effect (Hoem and Hoem 1997a). In addition, the importance of subsidized and available childcare cannot be underestimated when trying to outline significant family politics. In present-day Sweden, approximately 95 percent of all children between 2-5 years of age attend public or private daycare (The Swedish National Agency for Education 2007, 2008).

The present parental leave insurance consists of 480 days, of which 390 days are remitted with 80 percent of previous earnings (up to a relatively high ceiling), and 90 days have a low, flat rate. Two months out of the 390 days with 'full' pay cannot be passed on to the other parent; these are informally called 'daddy months'. These months were added to the insurance in two steps, 30 days in 1995 and 30 more in 2002 (The Swedish Social Insurance Office 2005). In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the government has declared that the political goal is to decrease the differences in parental leave take-up and to achieve an equal division (The Swedish Social Insurance Office 2005). Fathers of today use 20 percent of the insurance days (Statistics Sweden 2007a), and this could be seen as a rather extensive take-up, compared with other national contexts, but the discussion in Sweden continues to concern how to achieve a more even division between the sexes.

### ***Employment***

In Sweden, women and men participate in the paid labour force in near equal numbers (Statistics Sweden 2007b), and women constitute a majority of those enrolled in higher education (The Swedish National Agency for Higher Education and Statistics Sweden 2007). It has been argued that fertility rates are comparatively high in nations such as Sweden where it is possible for both men and women to combine parenthood and paid work (see e.g. Hoem 2005). The possibility to combine parenthood and work is, however, not necessarily dependent on generous public support. The US, for instance, with its limited family benefits, has seen during recent decades an increase in the number of mothers in the paid labour force without

witnessing decreasing fertility, and with a period fertility higher than that in Sweden (Morgan 2003). In addition, it is suggested that the maintenance of fertility in nations with a high percentage of women in the labour force depends on there being employment for men and women. That work and income are important factors for entering parenthood in Sweden is established in that fertility increases in groups with reasonable incomes, and in that temporarily employed and unemployed women have a 20 percent lower propensity to become parents compared to those with permanent positions. Men and women who are not registered either as in work or as unemployed and seeking work have the lowest propensity to enter parenthood of all the compared groups (Statistics Sweden 2002b). Official statistics show that students are less prone to have their first child than are other groups (that is, the unemployed, temporarily and permanently employed), and between 1987 and 2000, the proportion of people studying in the age group 20 to 24 rose from 12 percent to 25 percent, and in the age group 25 to 34, the figures increased from 5 percent to 7 percent (Statistic Sweden 2001b).

As I have mentioned earlier, it has been argued (see e.g. Björnberg et al. 2006; Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995; Nilsen and Brannen 2002) that the period of youth has been extended due to new demands for skilled, educated workers. Young women and men spend a longer period of time in the educational system which means that they are financially dependent (on family, loans and/or governmental funding) a longer period of life, and that they are consequently older when they (on a full-time basis) enter the labour force. Swedish studies indicate that it is particularly important for women to have an established career and a permanent sufficient income before trying for a child (Bernhardt 2000a; Hoem and Hoem 1987, 1997b; Kugelberg 2000; Löfström 2001; The National Social Insurance Board 2000 9; Stanfors 2003; Statistics Sweden 2001a). One reason for this could be that the parental leave insurance is based on previous earnings, and that women are those who use most of the parental leave.

Employment, however, does not have the same impact on all groups of women (and men) as regards their timing of parenthood. For men and perhaps particularly women over 30, age and the notion of getting older may supersede the importance of employment (Statistics Sweden 2001a, 2001b). It has been shown that a woman's fecundity decreases with age; the chances of conceiving drop for women over 30 (Departementserien

2001). This knowledge and/or cultural notions of when a person is at the right age to enter parenthood are aspects that appear to affect the timing of parenthood (Statistics Sweden 2001b); 'age' was the most common answer for men and women over 30 concerning what made them decided to try for a child (Statistics Sweden 2001a). Most of these men and women were, however, presumably rather established on the labour market, although not necessarily permanently employed.

In a British study of young teenage mothers, Phoenix (1991) suggested that stable employment has little, if any, impact on these women's choices to enter parenthood. This could be the case for smaller groups in Sweden as well, although I know of no study looking at this matter. Kugelberg's study (2000), on the other hand, indicates that employment is an important factor in Swedish men's and women's reproductive decision-making. It shows that university students and the permanently employed perceived their futures positively, accentuating opportunities rather than constraints, while upper secondary school students, temporarily employed and unemployed portrayed their future as uncertain and restrictive due to potential problems finding an occupation. They described their employment status as impeding their future plans, including entry into parenthood.

Kugelberg's study was conducted in the late 1990s, after people in Sweden had witnessed times of cut-downs in the social security net and high levels of unemployment. Young people in particular had difficulties finding jobs during this period, but it was amongst employed people, particularly the permanently employed, that the fertility decline was most prominent. For unemployed men and women, fertility did not decline in the 1990s (Statistics Sweden 2003a; see also The National Social Insurance Board 2001).<sup>3</sup> It has been suggested that people deferred having children due to the precarious labour market, and due to a wish to focus on career and salary rise, and that men and women in the 1990s entered parenthood later in life because there were other things they wanted to do first, besides issues related to work and education (Statistic Sweden 2001b).

In questionnaire surveys, a recurrent response concerning why parenthood has been deferred is that people 'wanted to do other things first' (Bernhardt 2000a, 2000b; Statistics Sweden 2001a). A report from

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<sup>3</sup> Unemployed people who worked prior to unemployment are entitled to the parental leave insurance.

Statistics Sweden, focusing on how fertility is related to employment, states that the economic recession in the 1990s alone could not explain the decreased and postponed fertility (2003a). Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2006) described a Swedish survey study, showing that one-third of those who had not yet entered parenthood fulfilled the criteria that Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) suggested are elementary conditions for making the transition: stable partner, completed education, a good enough income to provide for a child, and satisfactory accommodation. That is, survey data and official statistics support Second Demographic Transition Theory, which “predicts that ideational factors and changing goals and priorities in the lives of young people, especially in terms of the timing of life course events, are crucial in explaining the postponement of family formation” (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006: 20).

Thus far, my explication has been written mostly in very general terms. People are not just people; people are men and women, young, middle aged and old, and have different social, ethnic, educational and geographical backgrounds. What does previous research tell us about reproductive behaviour in specific groups of Swedish people?

### ***Gender and age, geographies and education***

Swedish official statistics cover fertility patterns among men and women at different ages and with different educational, ethnic and geographical backgrounds, but the categorization is rather crude, which is mirrored in the following overview. Women generally enter parenthood a couple of years younger than men do; the present mean age for first-time mothers is 29, and for first-time fathers around 31. This is a rather large contrast compared to the mid-1970s, when women’s mean age for entering parenthood was 23.5. Although Swedish period fertility has wavered, cohort fertility has been stable and around two children per woman for the cohorts born around 1900 and up to the 1960s, but statistical predictions indicate that women born in the first part of the 1970s will have fewer than the average two children (Statistics Sweden 2007d-h). In 1998, for the first time, fertility was higher in the age group 35-39 than among those between 20 and 24 (Departementserien 2001), and for women born 1971, only 30 percent had entered parenthood at the age of 25 (Hoem and Hoem 1997a),

while 60 percent of the women born in 1940 had done so (Hoem and Hoem 1987). The proportion of teenage parents, and particularly mothers, has decreased steadily since the 1970s, and most teenage pregnancies are terminated<sup>4</sup>. For women and men born in 1975, one percent of the women entered parenthood before the age of 18, and one percent of the men entered parenthood before the age of 20 (Departementserien 2001; Statistics Sweden 2002b).

Immigrants generally follow the same fertility pattern as ethnic Swedes. For an immigrant woman, the propensity to enter parenthood is higher the first years in Sweden, on the condition that she was 15 years old or older when she arrived, but after five years, the fertility appears to adapt to the average birth pattern. Some smaller groups of women, originating in Muslim countries, have birth rates higher than the average (Departementserien 2001).

There are some geographical differences in overall fertility rates. For Sweden, big cities (not including the suburbs) have lower fertility than do other regions (Statistics Sweden 2007f), possibly because many people with children move to the suburbs or to smaller cities. Cohort fertility shows that women and men residing in sparsely populated regions have more children than do those living in cities (Statistics Sweden 2002a).

Official statistics show that women with a post-upper secondary school education enter parenthood later, and have a lower propensity to have as many children, and to ever enter parenthood than do women with an upper secondary education or less. The differences are, however, rather small when women with different educational levels are compared (Statistics Sweden 2002a, 2002b). Another recent study on education and fertility, comparing different European countries, shows that the Nordic countries are different from others in that childlessness is highest among women with lower education rather than among highly educated women. According to Forssén and Ritakallio (2006: 166), “The Nordic countries prove that high fertility and high female education are not alternatives, but instead can be reconciled”. A recent study on the relationship between childlessness and education among Swedish women born in the second part of the 1950s shows that the educational level *per se* appears to be of lesser importance than the field of education. Women who worked in health care

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<sup>4</sup> Since the mid-1970s, a pregnant woman in Sweden has the right to an abortion up to the 18<sup>th</sup> week.

and teaching, independent of educational level, entered parenthood in higher numbers than did women in other educational fields (Hoem et al. 2006; see also Statistics Sweden 2002b). Men with a higher education have a higher propensity to enter parenthood compared to less educated men, but later in life (Statistics Sweden 2002a, 2002b).

Not all women and men become parents, but women do so to a greater extent than men do. Of the women born 1925-1960, 84-88 percent became mothers, and the estimated permanent childlessness for women in the future is around 16 percent (Statistics Sweden 2007h).

## **Situating lives: theoretical framework**

### **Social influence and the value of parenthood**

Up till now, I have given an overview of historical and contemporary fertility patterns, and of how fertility has been studied in relation to education, employment and welfare systems. I have shown how political and economic variables have been related to fertility, and presented the idea that the second demographic transition – the end of which we have not yet seen – is the consequence of changing ideals and norms, rather than primarily being triggered by economic and political circumstances. Reproductive decision-making is complex. Economic and political circumstances, and social and cultural values and norms influence individuals, and there are also physiological aspects. Few researchers argue differently, but one predominating approach is to look at fertility in relation to the economic and political context, and as a matter of individual cost and benefit calculations (Carter 1995). These kinds of studies are inclusive in that they usually illuminate the political and economic context in which individuals make their decisions, but other areas are often neglected, such as the impact of social networks, gender role attitudes, the intimate relationship, preferences about life, and the value of children. These aspects are important to consider when trying grasping the complexity of people's fertility, which many scholars have pointed out (see e.g. Bernardi 2003; Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006; Bongaarts and Watkins 1996; Carter 1998; Crosbie 1986; Fawcett 1988; Greenhalgh 1995; Jensen 1996; Lesthaeghe and Moors 1996; Rose Fischer 1988).

## ***Social influence***

Townsend (1997: 110) argued that fertility is fruitfully looked upon as “a social relationship, and as distributed between people”. Different actors may claim responsibilities and rights over (future) children, and when the purpose is to broaden our knowledge of what influences fertility, it is important to detect these actors and analyse their importance. Bernardi used the term social influence (see also Bongaarts and Watkins 1996: 659; Montgomery and Casterline 1996), defining it as “the process by which attitudes, values or behavior of an individual are determined by the attitudes, values or behavior of others with whom he or she interacts” (2003: 535). In line with other recent studies (see Bühler and Frątczak 2005), Bernardi showed that norms, values and practices of the social network affect procreative decisions (see also Basu and Aaby 1998; Bernardi et al. 2005; Greenhalgh 1995; Kertzer and Fricke 1997). Phoenix (1991), for instance, showed in her study on teenage mothers in Britain, that entering parenthood in the years around 20 was common in those teenagers’ network of friends and relatives and, thus, becoming a mother at this age was the normal thing to do. Morgan and Berkowitz King’s (2001) suggested that the decision to enter parenthood is influenced by having experienced the benefits of parenthood vicariously, through siblings and/or friends, and that negative vicarious experiences may cause people to postpone the transition (see e.g. Bernardi 2003: 531). Additionally, social status and social respect are elementary to humans; the decision to enter or not to enter parenthood is feasibly contingent on the social status ascribed to the transition (Jensen 1996; Morgan and Berkowitz King 2001), as well as to what implications and benefits entering parenthood is perceived to engender.

## ***Implications of parenthood***

The cost of having a child is believed to have increased in the Western world in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Concurrently with the increase in mass schooling, having a child turned into a monetary cost rather than an asset, and the child was increasingly valued emotionally rather than financially (Caldwell 1982; Sandin 2003; Zelitzer 1985). The costs of parenthood, as they appear to be defined in the contemporary Western world, are categorized in an illuminating way by Fawcett: increasing monetary expenses; loss of

income; opportunity costs (career, leisure activities, free time); psychological costs (less time for oneself, decreasing flexibility and mobility, increasing worries and concerns); and physical costs (straining bodily aspects of childbearing, childbirth and breastfeeding, as well as of childrearing) (Fawcett 1988: 16). Ideas about what parenthood implies are culturally and socially constructed and impact on people's practices. A parent obtains certain rights and obligations, which define the relationship to the child, but these rights and obligations are situated, dynamic and subjected to change (Townsend 1997).

It has been argued that parenthood entailed increasing expectations in 20<sup>th</sup> century Sweden as well as in other Western countries (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Gleichmann 2004; Sandin and Halldén 2003; Sandin 2003), and that parents' childrearing preferences have changed over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, away from praising obedience and good manners in the child, to encouraging independence, autonomy, and commitment to education (for future prospects). Alwin, who proposed this, suggested that there is a relationship between decreasing fertility and changes in childrearing (Alwin 1996).

Professionalism in the field of children expanded extensively after World War II, and social scientists gained increasing influence over people's everyday life; psychologists, doctors, teachers, politicians – all wanted to tell people how to raise, feed and care for their child, and what could possibly be the result in cases of 'neglect' (see e.g. Donzelot 1979; Gleichmann 2004; see also Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Today, childrearing is a hot topic in magazines, radio, TV programmes, and books, and there is an abundance of (various kinds of) information on how to best care for and raise a child. Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten (1997), in their study on Swedish parents, proposed that the accessible and expansive information on child development and childrearing causes many parents to feel insecure about their parental practices and burdened by the parental responsibility. Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten argued that Swedish parents are parents in a time when parenthood is formally and informally controlled. The 'wrong' upbringing and/or 'lacking' capabilities to raise the child 'properly' are looked upon as personal deficiencies of the parent(s); the parents have failed to live up to their responsibility as good parents – they have not acknowledged or have failed to practice knowledge about how to

act in accordance with what is best for the child. As a result, childless people may ask themselves whether they are ready and competent enough to have a child. Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten (1997) suggested that the cultural obligations connected with responsible and good parenthood could be an explanation as good as any of why people defer parenthood (see also Beck and Beck-Gersnheim 1995).

### ***The value of parenthood***

The image of parenthood as entailing new, heavy burdens and responsibilities may be daunting for some (or many), but most people, as it appears, look upon parenthood as an important, anticipated ingredient in life (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006; Departementserien 2001; Goldstein et al. 2003). Thus, when trying to gain wider insights into reproductive decision-making, it is important to consider the benefits of parenthood. The value of children has often been regarded in terms of monetary costs and benefits, but the cultural value of children (and parenthood), and how this may influence family formation, gender relations and fertility, has often been ignored (Jensen 1996). Fawcett (1988) detected a range of potential benefits of entering parenthood, in his exploration of values of children: Parenthood as a marker of adult status; parenthood as engendering social acceptance in that having a child at some stage is the expected thing to do; the child reproduces the family and connects the generations; the child brings joy in life and new experiences to the parents; the child is a permanent person to love; and, finally, the accomplishments of the child may reflect positively on the parents.

Beck and Beck-Gersnheim outlined what to them appeared to be general characteristics of the Western world, and they suggested that in a world characterized by insecurities and risks, regarding work as well as intimate relationships, a child is a promise of stability and “the final alternative to loneliness” (1995: 37). In addition, they suggested that parenthood may justify a refuge from labour market demands on flexibility, and from a self-centred life. A child could also be valued in that entering parenthood means “a transition in identity and in status” (Lee 2005: 9; see also Fawcett 1988; Jensen 1996; Oláh 2001: Paper III), and the child may become a social resource when the parents grow older - someone to rely on for help and support. Morgan and Berkowitz King (2001: 12) suggested

that: “Thus, while children may have lost all economic value, their value as a social resource may have persisted”. And as Rose Fischer stressed: “The birth of a child creates new role relationships for a whole set of family members who become grandparents, aunts, uncles, etc.” (1988: 201). It is thus important to acknowledge that a child reconstructs kin relations, and that a child may be valued as yet another member in the kinship network, a member who links people to one another in possible new and extended ways, and that a child is “needed to perpetuate the species and carry on the family line” (Fawcett 1988: 15). In Swedish studies, parenthood is referred to as being the meaning of life and a natural step to take. It is talked about in terms of reproducing one’s genes, and the child is referred to as a symbol of the parent’s commitment to and love for each other, and as something that is mutually shared and that unites (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Fagerberg 2000; Hagström 1999; Lundqvist and Roman 2003; Oláh 2001: Paper III).

## **Motherhood and fatherhood – family and independence**

It should not be forgotten that the transition to parenthood has different values and implications for different individuals, depending on, for instance, gender, age, social background and individual experiences. The image a person has of parenthood, before entering it, is formed by previous experiences, her/his social position, and the sociocultural context, which

intertwine and affect each other.<sup>5</sup> In addition, it is important to note that social and cultural values of parenthood may be contradictory to other notions of what signifies a good life and a socially accepted self. For instance, it has been shown that ideas related to family formation, and intimate relationships, are somewhat contradictory to the idea of the independent, self-fulfilling individual (see e.g. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Björnberg and Kollind 2005; Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997).

I look upon reproductive decision-making as culturally and socially embedded, and the following section serves to further contextualize the social and cultural context in which men and women act. People learn from others and are influenced by others, and they influence other people with their experiences and actions. The exploration below is focused on studies of the notions and practices of motherhood and fatherhood. This is followed by a section in which research on family and the romantic relationship is presented, and the chapter finishes with an illustration of the influential notion of the individualized, independent person.

### ***Women and men – mothers and fathers***

When analysing fertility, it is essential to acknowledge gendered structures and gender relations, as “gender is a pervasive force that structures all aspects of life. Reproductive life is no exception” (Greenhalgh 1995: 24). Looking at gender means looking at how the meanings of man and woman are constructed, the relationship between the two genders, and what this could mean for fertility in a certain context (Greenhalgh 1995). For

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<sup>5</sup> The discussion in this chapter, and in the empirical part, is a rather general one, and the reader should keep this in mind. In a special issue on intersectionality (EJWS 2006), feminist researchers discussed whether it is possible and fruitful to look at how different ‘social divisions’, such as gender, ethnicity *and* class, position individuals in certain ways (Phoenix and Pattynama 2006). Yuval-Davis (2006) saw difficulties in trying to include too many social divisions in the analysis, for instance the risk of neglecting individual agency and the dynamic (re)construction of social signifiers. She proposed that “in specific historical situations and in relation to specific people there are some social divisions which are more important than others in constructing specific positionings. At the same time, there are some social divisions, such as gender, stage in the life cycle, ethnicity and class, that tend to shape most people’s lives in most social locations” (Yuval-Davis 2006:203; Phoenix and Pattynama 2006: 188). Yuval-Davis argued that empirical studies imply which social divisions tend to affect the positioning of subjects and relations of power in a certain setting. Gender, life styles and parenthood versus childlessness were apparent divisions in the empirical data of the present study.

example, it has been shown that womanhood more than manhood is connected to parenthood, and that the implications of parenthood (in general) differ depending on the person's gender (e.g. Bekkengen 2002; Finch 2006; Kugelberg 1999; Phoenix and Woollett 1991). Weedon pointed this out by saying:

As children we learn what girls and boys should be and, later, what women and men should be. These subject positions – ways of being an individual – and the values inherent in them may not all be compatible and we will learn that we can choose between them. As women we have a range of possibilities. In theory almost every walk of life is open to us, but all the possibilities which we share with men involve accepting, negotiating or rejecting what is constantly being offered to us as our primary role – that of wife and mother (Weedon 1987: 3).

Feminist social scientists have argued and demonstrated that patriarchal relations structure our lives. The world is patriarchal in that values, attributes and practices connected to men and masculinity are superior to women and femininity; this forms material realities, practices, and understandings of who we are and of others (see e.g. Greenhalgh 1995; Stoppard 2000; Weedon 1987). Swedish research supports this picture (see e.g. Bekkengen 2002; Haas and Hwang 2007; Holmberg 1993). While women in Sweden have entered the paid labour force in great numbers since the 1960s, the stream of men going in the other direction has been thin indeed (Bergman and Hobson 2002) – a recurring pattern also in other Western contexts (Drew 1998; Finch 2006; Hochschild 1989). Previous research shows that the notion and practice of the male breadwinner continues to be evident in Sweden. Fathers maintain full-time employment and career ambitions after entering parenthood while many women, besides taking the main part of the parental leave, reduce their working hours in the paid labour force and become the primary parent (Bekkengen 2002; Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001; Finch 2006; Haas and Hwang 2007; Kugelberg 1999; Statistics Sweden 2003c). Mothers and fathers have been pictured as interchangeable parents, particularly in the Swedish political discourse (Klinth 2002), but this notion runs counter to psychological theories concerning the mother's natural closeness to the child (Bekkengen 2002; Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001; Kugelberg 1999), and what Wall

(2001) called the breastfeeding discourse. Castelain-Meunier (2002: 192) suggested that developmental psychology and the breastfeeding discourse have drawn Western mothers and children closer than they have been in the past, and have caused mothers to feel “over-responsible” for their children. Swedish studies support this notion, as well as the notion that men and women reproduce traditional gender roles (Bekkengen 2002; Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001; Kugelberg 1999; Mellström 2006; see also Haas and Hwang 2007).

In her Swedish study on the transition to parenthood and men’s and women’s parental leave take-up, Bekkengen (2002) argued that a man can choose the way he practices parenthood, including the time he spends on childcare, in a way that a woman cannot. Men have the possibility to opt out of parental responsibilities, and when men do care for children and the home, they are given a great deal of credit, as opposed to women, whose attentive, involved parenthood and household work are taken for granted. Bekkengen also showed that the man’s childrearing practices are valued more highly than the woman’s way of relating to the child, by both the man and the woman. The women in her study compared their childrearing methods with those of the man and referred to their own way as being inferior. Conclusively, men, by being men, are more valued in the labour market as well as in the home, but women become the primary parent, while men’s work and free time are less affected by the transition to parenthood (Bekkengen 2002; Brandth and Kvande 1998; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Kugelberg 1999; see also Holmberg 1993).

But are childless, young adults aware of the different implications motherhood and fatherhood could have? Could the timing of parenthood and fertility rates be affected by parental practices? By growing up in families with more or less traditional gender roles, observing siblings, friends, acquaintances and workmates with children, and experiencing romantic relationships and cohabitation (see Holmberg 1993), I believe, in accordance with social influence theory presented above, that many notice that the implications (and possibly also benefits) of parenthood often differ between men and women, mothers and fathers. Several Swedish researchers have suggested that gender inequalities in the share of household work and childrearing cause Swedish women to defer parenthood and to have fewer children; the opportunity costs of motherhood (or of having another child) may be regarded too great (Florin

2000; Hoem and Hoem 1997b; Lundqvist and Roman 2003; Lofström 2001; Stanfors 2003). Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2006) showed that Swedish men who are oriented towards gender equality and who intend to share household duties and childcare equally with the woman entered parenthood to a lesser extent than did more traditionally oriented men. Is it because these gender-equally-orientated men are aware that parenthood would entail less time for work and leisure time? Possibly.

### *Women and mothers*

Recent studies have shown that Swedish women do not regard themselves first and foremost as (becoming) mothers. Work, education and leisure time are of prime importance in how women portray and perceive themselves, and social status appears to be connected to these areas rather than to the domestic sphere in Sweden as well as in other Western contexts (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Brannen et al. 2002; Brembeck 2003; Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Haas and Hwang 2007; Jensen 1995; Kugelberg 1999; Sandström 2002). Women (and mothers) are, however, a heterogeneous group – also when it comes to preferences for family formation and working life, something often neglected in demographic research (Hakim 2003). Hakim proposed a new theory for understanding fertility in the contemporary Western world: the ‘preference theory’. She stressed that the contraceptive revolution of the 1960s gave women control over their fertility, and the ‘equal rights revolution’ gave women new opportunities in life in regard to education, work, leisure time and consumption – this led to new preferences and possibilities. Hakim categorized women into three groups (noting that there are also differences within the groups). These are: home-centred women (family life and children being main priorities throughout life); adaptive women (women trying to prioritize family life and paid work); and work-centred women (women that prioritize education, career, and leisure time – often childless). The first and the last group are rather small, while ‘adaptive women’ is by far the largest group in contemporary Western societies. The pattern, however, is not the same for men. Hakim argued that the majority of men are work-centred, and says that “[p]reference theory predicts that men will retain their dominance in the labor market, politics, and other competitive

activities, because only a minority of women are prepared to prioritize their jobs (or other activities in the public sphere) in the same way as men” (2003: 259).

Why is it, then, that family and children generally appear to be more important for women than for men? Hakim did not probe this question, but I believe I have given some suggestions above, for instance by referring to studies stressing that womanhood is closely connected to parenthood while manhood is not (Hobson and Morgan 2002; Phoenix and Woollett 1991), and that women/mothers are regarded as primary parents in the cultural context in which they act. But as Greenhalgh (1995) stated, women are no victims of cultural constraints – they resist, reinterpret and use available resources to form their lives. Most women continue to enter motherhood, so what is the attraction of caring for children and a family? Kugelberg (1999), for instance, showed that many Swedish women experience conflicting feelings when the man wishes to share the parental leave more equally, even though these women have a strong ‘work identity’. The mother’s self-image appears to be threatened when she is no longer the primary person in the child’s life.

Hays (1996) and Stoppard (2000) have proposed that the notion of the (good and normal) woman and mother as care orientated, that is, as selfless and self-sacrificing, remains strong in the Western world. Thus, it appears relevant to propose that this could have an essential impact on women’s preferences and subjectivities. That is, women want to become, stay, or turn into ‘real’ women, and they may do so by practicing the notion of the good mother/woman. In addition, having the feeling ‘of being everything’ to a child could be very attractive, in that it could give rise to unique feelings of superiority and of being irreplaceable in a world where patriarchal values and men’s superiority persist. ‘Being everything’ to the child could also constitute the promise of stability and an “alternative to loneliness” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 37) in times when separation and divorce are common phenomena. The attraction of entering motherhood may also relate to myths of motherhood, as indicated by Jensen (1995: 238), who stated that “(b)oth women and men are subjected to powerful myths about motherhood and fatherhood, myths which neither sex is willing (consciously or not) to abandon. While the ideology of mothers’ superior skills with children remains powerful, the role of fathers as caretakers is poorly defined and receives little social support”. These

myths attach women and mothers to children, and womanhood to motherhood.

An additional difference between men and women is that women are the ones affected by the direct bodily implications of parenthood. (There is always a woman and a pregnancy behind the birth of a child, also in cases of adoption and surrogacy). The woman may experience fatigue, illness, and other possible straining aspects of childbearing. Women's bodies experience childbirth as well as the possible postpartum complications and women's bodies are supposed to be available for the child for breastfeeding. Carter (1995) stressed that notions of the (female) body and sexuality are important to include in any analysis of reproductive behaviour (see also Ginsburg 1989; Martin 1987).

### *Men and fathers*

It is important to note that men as well as women have different preferences in life, different resources to attain their goals, and different experiences. One should also consider that notions of what fatherhood implies are situated and culturally constructed (Björnberg 1998; Hearn 2002; Lupton and Barclay 1997). Hakim (2003) suggested that men are more homogenous than women are in their preferences in life, but this may be an effect of men having fewer alternative ways to practice manhood without risking stigmatization and social sanctions. Men may not be able to entertain the more family-oriented preferences and practices of women without risking stigmatization and the feeling of being less of a man.

Normal manhood appears to be strongly connected to paid labour (Brandth and Kvande 1998; Finch 2006; Haas and Hwang 2007; Mellström 2006; see also Faludi 1999), and this notion could also be used by men to justify their actions, such as prioritizing work and career and leaving childcare and household duties mainly to the woman, whose career may suffer as a result (Bekkengen 2002). However, Western men are no longer connected to work and the public sphere only, especially not when they become fathers. The attentive, involved father is an increasingly available image for men to identify with, which facilitates more active engagement in childrearing and household, at least in some cultural and social contexts. Chronholm's (2004) study on Swedish men who used a comparatively

large share of the parental leave insurance is one example of this (see also Brandth and Kvale 1998; Coltrane 1996). Since the 1960s and 1970s the father's role in the child's development has been increasingly stressed, and the image of the absent, primarily breadwinner father has been taken over by the 'new' man – the caregiving, committed father who spends time and energy on emotional bonding with his child (Chronholm 2004; Forsberg 2007a; Hagström 1999; Klinth 2002; Lupton and Barclay 1997; Phoenix and Woollett 1991). It has been articulated in Swedish family politics from the 1970s onwards that men are to be emancipated, that is, men are to experience new sides of themselves by taking an active part in household work and childrearing (Klinth 2002).

Contemporary public images of fathers in Sweden, reflected in advertising and counselling literature, picture 'new', involved and caring fathers, but worth noting is that these men are no less traditionally masculine in appearance and desires; they are muscular, career-oriented, independent, self-secure, and virile and thus continue to represent a rather traditional form of the ideal man (Hagström 1999). Based on their study of depictions of fatherhood in a Canadian newspaper, Wall and Arnold (2007) suggested that the image of the man as the secondary parent persists, despite the concurrent emphasis on men being involved fathers. The woman continues to be pictured as the person primarily responsible for family life and childrearing, also in cases of dual-income couples. They discussed their findings in relation to the current debate among fatherhood researchers on father images (culture) versus fathers' practices (conduct), and wrote that "(r)ather than the conduct of fathers' lagging behind cultural expectations, this study supports the contention that cultural expectations are in fact in line with the reality of mothers as primary caregivers" (Wall and Arnold 2007: 522). When talking to men about their fathering preferences, however, a great deal of Western research has shown an increasing orientation towards new fatherhood. It has also illuminated the complexities and dilemmas associated with contradictory images of fatherhood (breadwinner and new man); the practicalities that may hinder fathers from being as involved in childcare as they would like (such as employment conditions), and the notion that the mother is naturally closer to the child owing to biological aspects such as pregnancy and breastfeeding (Chronholm 2004; Hagström 1999; Henwood and Procter 2003; Johansson and Klinth 2007; Kugelberg 1999; Lupton and Barclay

1997; Mellström 2006; Plantin 2001).

As mentioned above, the continuing debate concerns whether fatherhood has actually changed in terms of conduct. Swedish social scientists say ‘yes, at least to some extent’ (Bekkengen 2002; Hagström 1999; Johansson and Klinth 2007; Kugelberg 1999; Plantin 2001). It seems to be a common understanding in most of this work that men have changed their practices towards their children more than in the relationship towards the mother. Bekkengen (2002) called this a ‘child-orientated masculinity’, stemming from the increased child-centeredness and focus on parents’ responsibility to create an auspicious environment for the child to grow and develop in (see also Lupton and Barclay 1997: 20). Being a ‘new’ father thus means being more attentive towards the child, but less so towards removing gender differences in relation to the woman. That is, women continue to do the main share of household duties and spend the most time on childcare and less time on leisure activities and work. International research supports this by stressing that fathers do not appear to connect the time spent on childcare with the practice of involved fatherhood. Rather, the intention and desire to become more emotionally close to their children appear to be enough when men define themselves as being attentive, engaged and, in comparison to previous generations, new fathers (Craig 2006; Dermott 2003). Phoenix and Woollett’s argument thus appear to be of great relevance still:

Being a parent is a less all-embracing definition of a man than of a woman. To know that a man is a father is generally less informative about how he spends his time and energies than to know that a woman is a mother. It is still possible for men to be seen and to see themselves as ‘good fathers’ without being closely involved in childcare or spending much time with their children (Phoenix and Woollett 1991: 4).

The fathering practices and images available to fathers and not-yet fathers are not clear-cut categories. Men may fill fatherhood with different contents at different times, and some images of fatherhood may appear more attractive to some men than to others, and may affect men’s reproductive decision-making, as Bernhardt and Goldscheider (2006) suggested in their comparison of men with gender equal views and men with more traditional views of fatherhood. Lupton and Barclay proposed

that “(m)en will take up and adopt different discourses and practices at different times, perhaps ascribing to contradictory discourses simultaneously” (1997: 17).

In two different qualitative studies with a similar composition of Swedish men as informants, the decision to enter parenthood was rather differently explained. Plantin (2001) described the men in his study as rather uninvolved in the decision to enter parenthood; the woman is described as being the ‘clucky’ one, pushing for a decision. Hagström (1999), on the other hand, stressed that men are as engaged as women in the decision-making process concerning if and when to become a parent. That is, entering parenthood appears to be as important for a man as it could be for a woman (see also Knijn et al. 2006). Are the men in these two studies necessarily different, or do they, following Lupton and Barclay’s (1997) proposal, just ‘happen’ to relate to different discourses at the specific time of the interview? Could a man interviewed by a man (Plantin) be more prone to perform traditional masculinity by disassociating himself from the female arena of reproduction, while a man interviewed by a woman (Hagström) has ‘more to win’ by positioning himself as a new father, involved from conception onwards? Although worth considering, I will not dwell upon this any further.

### ***Family and the intimate relationship<sup>6</sup>***

When people enter parenthood and have a child they form a (new) family, as it is commonly seen. A common, Western image of a family is a man and a woman and one or more children<sup>7</sup>. Men and women perceive, construct, practice and perform motherhood and fatherhood in and through the families in which they live.

There is reason for us to take a closer look at contemporary characteristics of family life and intimate, romantic relationships. Previous studies have suggested that there may be an increasing trend towards

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<sup>6</sup> The main part of this section is taken from Bergnéhr (2006: paragraph 2-6).

<sup>7</sup> I am aware that not all women and mothers, men and fathers (and children) live in heterosexual families and relationships, but the majority do, and the focus group participants in the present study are, to my knowledge, heterosexual; also society is heteronormative in that a heterosexual arrangement and family building constitute the norm around which a great deal of politics, regulations and social life are based (Berlant and Warner 2000).

alternative ways of 'doing family' (Bak 2003; Morgan 1996; Roseneil and Budgeon 2004; Roseneil 2000; see also Simpson 1998). Men and women may choose other social relationships and networks for intimacy, love and care rather than that of living and raising children in a traditional nuclear family with two parents and their mutual children. However, the nuclear family ideal predominates in the contemporary Western world (Berlant and Warner 2000), and Swedish studies support this picture. Despite the fact that a person who is single is not looked upon dubiously ('singlehood' may even be regarded as an attractive option at some stages in life), a predominant goal is to find Ms/Mr Right and to become a couple, and possibly at some stage to have children together (Engwall 2005). Parents who do not raise their children in a nuclear family, owing to, for example, separation or homosexuality, are affected by this ideal. Some may choose to organize their lives differently. Others (by finding a new partner and/or arranging the household and reproduction around the ideal of "a couple") achieve a family grounded on the nuclear family model, although of a somewhat different nature (Bak 2003; Zetterqvist Nelson 2007; see also Simpson 1997, 1998). Official statistics support the claim that the nuclear family is the dominating norm in Sweden. Although divorce and separation are anything but rare phenomena in the Swedish society of today, the most common arrangement for a child is to grow up with both original (biological or adoptive) parents. Approximately 70 percent of children in Sweden live in a traditional nuclear family - young children to a greater extent and older children to a lesser extent (Statistics Sweden 2003b).

Parallel to the nuclear family ideal, young Swedish adults are influenced by the notion of dual-earner dual-carer families (Björnberg 2002; Florin and Nilsson 2000). Caring for and minding the child is not regarded as primarily a woman's duty and right (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Chronholm 2004); the child is viewed as a mutual responsibility, both with regard to emotional and physical care and with regard to financial provision (Bernhardt 2005)<sup>8</sup>. But the child is not only the parents' mutual responsibility. Swedish studies indicate that a child serves as a symbol of a good relationship and of the parents' commitment to each other; the child becomes a project that bonds (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Lundqvist and Roman 2003). However, the arrival of the child does

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<sup>8</sup> However, as has been shown above, parenthood has different implications for women and for men, as good fatherhood and good motherhood are defined differently.

not necessarily affect the relationship between the parents favourably. On the contrary, it has been shown that the transition to parenthood in many cases decreases marital satisfaction (Shapiro et al. 2000; Wadsby and Sydsjö 2001; cf. Gähler and Rudolphi 2004). With the child as the main focus, demanding constant care and attention, and as a new object of love, less affection may be shared between the partners, causing strains on the relationship (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). In a British study based on in-depth interviews, one experience of the transition to parenthood expressed by both men and women is the negative effect it had on the relationship (Gatrell 2005), and although not as explicitly stated this is also a finding in an interview study of Swedish couples (Kugelberg 1999).

Why, then, may the transition to parenthood induce strains on the relationship? This is a question of great magnitude, but by referring to late-modern theorists such as Giddens (1992), Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) and Bauman (2001, 2003), who talk about an increasing individualization in contemporary societies, it is possible to isolate some significant characteristics of partner relationships in the Western world to use when discussing parenthood and union dissolution. Men and women today are influenced by the notions of self-fulfilment and of having a life of one's own. A person should be a committed worker as well as devoted mother/father, lover and friend (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Giddens 1992; see also Kugelberg 1999). A relationship may restrain the individual's freedom to 'live one's own life', and with two people (in the dual earner, dual carer family) trying to fulfil themselves through work, education and leisure time activities the relationship may be hard to sustain (Bauman 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Hobcraft and Kiernan made a point when they summed up by saying that "[i]f both partners have a substantial investment in and attachment to the labour force then the time available for household maintenance and childrearing is reduced considerably. Small wonder that modern couples find the pressures of becoming parents more daunting than earlier generations" (1995: 56). Parallel to this is what Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) called the new meaning of life, which is to find "true love". Love is "the new centre round which our detraditionalized life revolves" (1995: 3), and love is regarded as the way to happiness. The search for intimacy and love in a partner relationship increases, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argued, in individualized societies where "other social bonds seem too tenuous or unreliable" (1995:

24).

But attainment of love and intimate relationships is more difficult than ever. Love is defined and influenced by a romantic, conflict-free ideal, and this does not correlate well with individual experiences (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). As Gillis (1996) concluded in his study on American family life: A person has two kinds of families, one she lives by in her mind, which is founded on myths and rituals and freed of strains, and the one she lives with, which is the unstable, conflict ridden family of everyday life. The ambivalence the two families result in is a prominent characteristic of late modern family life.

People today enter a relationship with the expectation that the relationship will give intimacy, sexual pleasure and emotional support. A predominating notion is that a relationship should be based on love, trust and equity with no regulations other than to last as long as both people involved desire (Giddens 1992). Thus, individuals committed to a romantic relationship are aware of that it may not be forever, and this may cause feelings of stress, anxiety, insecurity and loss of self-esteem (Bauman 2003; Giddens 1992). When a couple enter parenthood, or are thinking about having a child, concerns of this sort may increase.

### ***The (in)dependent individual***

#### *The individualization thesis*

Late-modern theorists such as Giddens (1991, 1992, 1994) and Beck (1992, 1994) have been criticized for painting a picture of contemporary Western lives that does not mirror the reality, is far too generalizing, and portrays individuals as masters of their own lives to a much too great extent (see e.g. Brannen and Nilsen 2005; Duncan and Smith 2006). Giddens and Beck are connected with the individualization thesis, the proposal that life in the Western world has become more and more individualized. The 'individualized society' (Bauman 2001) is a society in which the individual has more options of how to live and is free from traditions that previously tied her/him to a certain occupation, place, social network, and marriage. In the modern world, people's biographies are characterized by choice. When it comes to relatives, friends, and intimate relationships, people choose whom to interact with, and the idea is that contemporary relationships are based on free will and sustained only as long as the individuals involved

desire it (see Giddens 1992).

This notion of intimacy has been criticized as being too idealistic; relationships of today are imbued with asymmetric power relations and gendered structures, and people may feel forced, for different reasons, to stay in a marriage and to sustain a relationship with, for instance, family members (Jamieson 1998; see also Holmberg 1993). It has also been argued that traditions, such as marriage, marital births and religious practices, continue to have a great impact on people's biographies, and that community, kinship and family relations continue to be significant aspects that form our lives (Duncan and Smith 2006; Lash 1994).

It is important to note the problems of the individualization thesis, but I find much of the critique way too hard and not always fair. For instance, I do not see that Giddens and Beck (and Bauman) have neglected structural constraints in their theorizing. On the contrary, I find that particularly Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) have a very structural perspective on people's lives. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have argued that free choice does not signify the 'choice biography', what it signifies is that making choices is mandatory, and that the choices that we make are formed by individualization, the labour market and by welfare institutions. It is an "institutionalized individualism" that we are witnessing: the notion of a free and independent individual who is capable of making rational choices based on her/his rational calculations of costs and benefits. But the outcome of a choice is never certain, and the vision of the free, individualized individual is a mere illusion. There continues to be "considerable pressure to conform and behave in a standardized way; the means which encourage individualism also induce sameness" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 40).

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim have argued that it is the neo-liberal labour market that forms people's lives through its demands for mobility and flexibility, and individuality. According to my reading, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's reasoning concurs with Nilsen and Brannen's succinct account that:

the *stories* which some people tell about their lives may be permeated by the emphasis on agency and reflexivity that characterises so much contemporary discourse. While the lives people *live* continue to be processually and contextually embedded, people find the external and structural forces that shape their lives more difficult to comprehend.

Individualisation in its current meaning and usage can therefore also be construed as having an ideological function in shaping *perspectives* about life (Nilsen and Brannen 2002: 41, emphasis in original).

The notion of individualization appears strong and influential in contemporary Western economic, political and social contexts, and it may vary in strength depending on specific national politics and welfare systems. Duncan and Smith (2006) argued that their exploration of the British context invalidates the individualization thesis, but their conclusion may have been of another sort if Sweden had been investigated. Sweden is different from the UK, for instance in terms of its high rates of cohabitation and children born out of wedlock, high proportion of women (and mothers) in the paid labour force, long tradition of individual taxation, and laws allowing homosexuals to adopt and receive insemination. In this regard, Sweden is comparatively de-traditionalized, a de-traditionalization partly facilitated and engendered by the welfare state. Sweden, it has been argued, may be one of the most individualistic countries in the world (Berggren and Trägårdh 2006; see also Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006); the welfare state facilitates individual independence to a rather great extent.

### *Performances of independence*

I find Lee's work (2005) interesting in that he convincingly argues that social status and value in the Western world depends on the person being able to portray her or himself as independent and 'separated' (see also Hockey and James 1993). The high status of independence emanates from colonialism and industrialization, where notions of the self-made Western man were shaped. The notion of independence grew stronger with the influence of Jean Piaget and Sigmund Freud, who discussed the developmental stages leading to adulthood in terms of increasing independence (Lee 2005). Individual independence is a false vision, however, as every person, and the outcome of his/her life, is dependent on other people, but "this cultural tendency to give high status to those able to sustain a performance of separateness, be it financial, emotional, cognitive or attitudinal performances, means that today's adult individuals often find themselves working towards or desirous of such independence" (Lee 2005: 38). In my view, Lee's argumentation that people of today are obliged and

inclined to let the ideal of separateness direct their lives correlates with that of Bauman (2001) and Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002). Economics and politics, the labour market and educational systems are organized around the principle of independence, but it is a principle in conflict with notions of community, belonging, family formation and family relations – aspects of people’s life that are of such great importance (Lee 2005). One benefit of the individualization thesis, as I see it, is that it can be used to understand how the ideal of the self-reliant, independent individual conflicts with other ideals and images, such as those of the romantic relationship, the (nuclear) family, kinship, good motherhood and fatherhood, and auspicious childhoods.

In this chapter, the influence of social and cultural context on reproductive decision-making has been explored. I have discussed the contemporary costs and benefits of entering parenthood as well as the general characteristics of motherhood, fatherhood and the family. I have also pointed to the ideal of the independent individual and to the notion of individualization. The explication includes research studies and arguments that have helped me illuminate and analyse the focus group data. It also serves as a wider introduction to the contemporary societal context that structures young adults’ lives and within which young adults enter parenthood, and interpret, resist, affirm, and reproduce the constraints and possibilities that form their lives.

The time has now come for the third chapter. Here, the reader is introduced to the analytical tools and perspectives that have influenced me in the analysis of my data. This is followed by a presentation of the research questions that have driven the work. The last part of the chapter is dedicated to the focus group data *per se*, that is, the composition and conduct of the focus groups, ending with a brief reflection over the analytical process.

# 3

## Methodology

### Analytical perspectives

#### *Anthropological demography and a social constructionist perspective*

The theoretical perspectives that have inspired my analysis originate from different scientific disciplines, but have much in common. One way of approaching fertility that has influenced me is the one presented within what some call ‘anthropological demography’ (Basu and Aaby 1998; Kertzner and Fricke 1997). Anthropologists studying reproductive decision-making do so from a social constructionist approach and use mainly qualitative methods. Rather than assuming that there are general, universal factors that determine fertility in a certain way, they aim at ‘situating fertility’. Greenhalgh put it in the following way:

the working assumption is that there are many kinds of fertility patterns, all of interest, and each shaped by a combination of forces that is to some degree spatially, temporally, and culturally specific. Given our limited understanding of the diversity of reproductive behaviours throughout history, and of the forces that shape them, a central aim of current research is to *situate fertility*, that is, to show how it makes sense given the sociocultural and political economic context in which it is embedded (Greenhalgh 1995: 17, emphasis in original).

In the anthropological perspective lies an interest in illuminating the meanings parenthood and having children have for certain groups of people

at certain times, and in looking at reproductive decision-making in light of the relationship between structural constraints and individual agency (see e.g. Basu and Aaby 1998; Handwerker 1986; Greenhalgh 1995; Kertzer and Fricke 1997). The approach is strongly influenced by social constructionism and feminist theories. Fertility is looked upon as socially and politically constructed and these constructions are dynamic and subject to change (Greenhalgh 1995). Neither becoming a parent or being/remaining childless is a neutral position; both statuses are connected to specific attributes that vary depending on the specific context. Pregnancy, parenthood and childlessness are connected to specific benefits, constraints and stigmas, and these are related to the value of the child (Carter 1995). The value of the child, in turn, is related to notions of what male, female and family formation mean (see e.g. Bledsoe 1995).

The social constructionist approach that anthropologists such as Greenhalgh have proposed emphasizes individual agency and looks upon power as something relational and dynamic, at the micro as well as macro level. Social constructionism is a broad term, and no single description is adequate for all who refer to themselves as social constructionists, but Burr (1995) did outline some common characteristics. First, signifying social constructionism is a critical stance towards truths. That is, knowledge is seen as constructed and subjective, as are categorizations that people organize their lives around. Second, a social constructivist believes that peoples' understandings of the world, and of themselves, differ and depend on historical and cultural context. Third, language and social interaction are regarded as being of prime interest to study because it is within and through language that knowledge – that is, values, attitudes, norms, and the sense of self – is understood, produced, negotiated and reconstructed. Studying the production of knowledge enables us to improve our understandings of people's (situated) actions, agency and power relations (Burr 1995), in accordance with Foucault, who depicted his aim to be to “move less toward a ‘theory’ of power than toward an ‘analytics’ of power” (1978: 82).

### ***Poststructuralist influences***

I would like to amplify and specify my application of social constructivist thinking by turning to poststructuralist work inspired by Foucault (see e.g. 1978). The term discourse is central in these writings, and discourse, as it is

used in this scientific context, is central also in my analysis of the focus group data. But before turning to the definition of discourse, I will try to outline essential characteristics of poststructuralist work that has influenced me, though acknowledging that, as Weedon (1987: 19f) noted, post structuralism is a broad term with multiple applications.

Poststructuralist work stems from what has been called structuralism. The theorizing of language is essential in both these research traditions; language is considered to constitute thought and experiences, that is, “meaning is produced within language rather than reflected by language” (Weedon 1987: 23; see also Burr 1995; Jones 1997). The meaning of a certain word, such as parent, is related to other words, or ‘signs’, such as child and childless. That is, “individual signs do not have intrinsic meaning but acquire meaning through the language chain and their difference within it from other signs. These principles are important because they make language truly social and a site of political struggle” (Weedon 1987: 23). One of the differences between structuralism and post-structuralism is that the latter emphasizes change and the unfixed nature of meaning, that is, that power is relational and within language; meaning is ‘a site of political struggle’ (Weedon 1987: 23ff). That is, there are competing ways to understand, for instance, parenthood, and thus parenthood is never fixed but constantly negotiated. Language constitutes our sense of the world and ourselves, but meanings and interpretations are multiple and unfixed, which cause power struggles, ambivalence and dilemmas (Davies 2004; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Weedon 1987; Wetherell 1998).

Much of the work I find inspirational has been conducted by (feminist) social psychologists or within what has been called discursive social psychology. How do people look upon themselves and who they are? How do they portray themselves to others? These are important questions in these scientific traditions and in much poststructuralist theorizing (see e.g. Hollway 1989; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Weedon 1987; Wetherell 1998). In line with social constructivist thinking, a poststructuralist is not interested in studying an inner or pre-given self. The self is looked upon as dynamic and under constant reconstruction and the process of constructing, forming and performing selves and identities is regarded as an important subject matter to study. As Potter and Wetherell suggested in their discussion on the concept of self: "There is not 'one' self to be discovered or uncovered but a multitude of selves found in different kinds of linguistic

practices articulated now, in the past, historically and cross-culturally" (1987: 102), and, quoting Harré, they stated that "to be a self is not to be a certain kind of being but to be in possession of a certain kind of theory" (Rom Harré quoted in Potter and Wetherell 1987: 102). Thus, an individual possesses and is 'possessed' by a 'certain theory', or rather theories that form her/his sense of self. Potter and Wetherell (1987) encouraged researchers to study constructions of selves, to see which selves, at a certain time and place, appear to be dominant and ascribed high value, and to ponder possible individual, social and societal consequences of the specific construction of selves. With this perspective, social life and interaction are largely a matter of constructing selves. They are about negotiating, opposing and affirming attitudes and values while trying to understand and portray who I am and who you are.

The focus group data of the present thesis are built around constant constructions and negotiation of selves, and, in accordance with Potter and Wetherell (1987), I found it interesting to try to detect prominent selves, the struggle over 'normal' selves, and in relation to previous studies such as many of those presented in the previous chapters, to suggest possible consequences (on, for instance, reproductive decision-making) that the dominance of certain selves may have for certain individuals.

There are those who find it problematic to apply terms such as self and identity to poststructuralist work (see e.g. Hollway 1989). Self and identity are regarded as too closely connected to the humanist notion of the person, that is, the traditional Western view of the subject as having a unified, singular and consistent self/identity, coherent values and predictable behaviour (Burr 1995; Freeman 1993). Identity, for instance, has been used as a rather static, determining category in traditional social research where it is presented as something a person acquires when s/he is born into a certain social class and/or ethnic group (Widdicombe 1998). Instead of talking about selves and identities, some refer only to subjectivity (see Hollway 1989). Others, however, use self and identity, as I understand it, rather synonymously with subjectivity (see Potter and Wetherell 1987; Riessman 2001, 2002), and this is also what I will do.

Subjectivity is a central term within poststructuralist writing. "Subjectivity refers to our sense of personal identity" (Mathuner and Hey 1999: 71). It "is used to refer to the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of the individual, her sense of herself and her ways of

understanding her relation to the world" (Weedon 1987: 32). However, in line with poststructuralist theory, the subject and subjectivities are 'decentred'. That is, self, identity and subjectivity are looked upon as "precarious, contradictory and in process, constantly being reconstituted" (Weedon 1987: 32). Thus, as stated above, the process of (re)constructing selves, in interaction with others and in certain contexts, is of interest to study, and is part of what I do. I look at how the focus group participants draw on certain discourses and how they position themselves and are positioned in relation to them. The time has now come to discuss discourse and subject positioning – two important concepts within poststructuralist writing and for the present thesis.

## ***Discourse and subject positioning***

### *Discourse*

Discourse is a central term within poststructuralist research, and most of the work that has inspired me has been influenced by Foucault's definition of the concept. Hall outlined Foucault's application of discourse, as follows. The reader should be familiar with parts of the reasoning after the above discussion of poststructuralism.

By 'discourse', Foucault meant 'a group of statements which provide a language for talking about - a way of representing the knowledge about - a particular topic at a particular historical moment ... Discourse is about the production of knowledge through language. But ... since all social practices entail *meaning*, and meanings shape and influence what we do - our conduct - all practices have a discursive aspect' (Hall, 1992: 291). It is important to note that the concept of *discourse* in this usage is not purely a 'linguistic' concept. It is about language *and* practice. It attempts to overcome the traditional distinction between what one *says* (language) and what one *does* (practice). Discourse, Foucault argues, constructs the topic. It defines and produces the objects of our knowledge. It governs the way a topic can be meaningfully talked about and reasoned about. It also influences how ideas are put into practice and used to regulate the conduct of others (Hall 2001: 72, emphasis in original).

Discourses can be referred to as meaning-making systems that include thinking, talking and acting, and that exist in written documents, oral

forms, and in the activities of everyday life. Discourses are embodied notions that are expressed and articulated in speech and action (Stoppard 2000; Weedon 1987). In line with Foucault, I do not make a distinction between discourse and practice; to me, practice is constituted by discourses. For example, there is a variety of evident discourses in the focus group data collected for this thesis, some more dominant than others, and it is impossible for me to say which of the discourses prevail in practice outside the focus group context. However, there is a large amount of official statistics, quantitative surveys and qualitative research that provide a picture of people's practices. These studies can be of use when speculating about which discourses appear to guide practice in certain situations and among certain people.

Although we understand and picture the world through discourse, discourse is not everything, as I see it. Material circumstances impact on our lives, differently for different people. The body, for instance, restricts and facilitates; we are born in a certain body with certain physical attributes, containing certain needs – it enables and constrains us, and it provides us with and deprives us of life, to some extent independently of discourse. Material circumstances, such as income, employment, residence and general living conditions, impact on people's lives. They may drain some people's bodies of energy, while entailing opportunities rather than restrictions for others; they may facilitate the embracement of certain discourses for some, while curtailing the practical appropriation of similar positions for others. Stoppard (2000: e.g. 92) referred to this as a "material-discursive" approach. My analytical emphasis throughout the thesis is, however, on the discursive level.

### *The ambivalent nature of discourse*

Discourses and the impact of a certain discourse change because they are defined and applied in different ways. Discourses are parts of 'power games' – of the struggle to persuade others of the rightfulness of one's own interpretations. Power relations are in this way imbued in the construction of discourse, and in discourse analysis. Discourses are often contradictory, and this creates ambivalence and 'conflicting' subjectivities and actions. Contradictory discourses and the continuous negotiation over meaning

engender a subject (subjectivity, identity and self) that is multiple and changing (Davies 2004; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Weedon 1987). This could engender feelings of ambivalence, as subjects in the Western world look upon themselves as being coherent and unified subjects and try to picture themselves as such (Freeman 1993; see also Davies et al. 2006). Contemporary Swedish womanhood, for instance, is connected to self-fulfilment in terms education and career, but also to the more traditional notion of a woman as self-sacrificing and attentive to the desires and needs of others. These elements from two different discourses on womanhood influence Swedish women and create dilemmas, but differently depending on the woman's experiences – experiences connected to age, appearance, occupation, social background, ethnicity, and so on and so forth. As was shown in the second chapter, the notion of the self-sacrificing parent appears also to have an increased influence on men's positioning as being a father. Manhood, however, continues to be strongly connected to work, and fatherhood to being the main breadwinner. The breadwinner discourse appears to predominate a great deal in practice.

### *Positioning and agency*

The variety of often-contradictory discourses encourages people to engage in reflection, agency and reinterpretation. That is, besides creating dilemmas and ambivalence, they provide alternatives. Weedon pointed to this by saying that "it is language in the form of conflicting discourses which constitutes us as conscious thinking subjects and enables us to give meaning to the world and to act to transform it" (Weedon 1987: 31).

Within the poststructuralist perspective, people are seen as being constituted through discourse; they "exist at the points of intersection of multiple discursive practices, those points being conceptualized as subject positions" (Davies 2004: 7). That is, subjects and subjectivities are constructed in relation to "discourses presently in circulation" (Freeman 1993: 198). In addition to this, the concept of subject positioning (Davies and Harré 1990) illuminates subjects as active agents in their everyday lives and in the construction of self. People actively position themselves in relation to different discourses, which they, through their positioning, affirm and reject, embrace and oppose, and redefine in relation to other

subjects. People use different positions in their identity construction; there is a continual (unconscious and conscious) exercise in understanding and demonstrating who I am. The status of a certain identity – of a certain subject position – is defined and ‘preferred identities performed’ in this process, and it is possible to explore how meanings are produced and negotiated by analysing current discourses and individual subject positionings (Mauthner and Hey 1999). Subject positioning and the construction of self are always ideological in that certain positions and notions of self predominate at certain times and in certain contexts (Potter and Wetherell 1987).

There are those who argue that there is a tendency within poststructuralist research to focus mainly on how discourses constitute subjects rather than to study human agency (see e.g. Freeman 1993; Wetherell 1998; Widdicombe 1998), but there are also those who stress the risk of illuminating individual agency without acknowledging structuring circumstances (Connell 2004; Jones 1997). To me, a discourse analysis that includes a subject positioning approach is a fruitful way to look at individual agency as well as at the constituting aspect of discourse, in line with the anthropological proposal that one should regard both structuring aspects and individual agency when studying reproductive decision-making. I am inspired by feminist researchers who have pointed out that individual experiences and feelings should be included when studying subjectivity. They have illuminated gendered aspects of subject positioning and concluded that the availability of positions varies depending on a person's gender, as well as on other aspects such as age, ethnicity, and social background (Aitken and Burman 1999; Hollway 1989; Lupton and Barclay 1997; Mauthner and Hey 1999; Stoppard 2000; Weedon 1987). Stoppard (2000), for instance, talked about 'discourses of femininity', which “refers to shared beliefs within a culture about what it means to be a woman. Discourses of femininity reflect implicit cultural guidelines for women on how to behave in womanly ways – how to be a ‘good woman’” (Stoppard 2000: 92). These guidelines, in correlation with material circumstances, impact on women’s subjectivities and lives.

A subject’s positioning in relation to different discourses is thus constrained and made possible in relation to body and gender. That is, although power is relational and in this way can be viewed as being played out on a micro level – among individuals in certain settings – power is also

macro in the sense that some values and discourses predominate and continue to impact on women's and men's bodies and lives more than do alternative ways of perceiving the world (Mauthner and Hey 1999; Stoppard 2000; Weedon 1987). Through feminist and social psychologist theorizing on subject positioning, I have come to realize that it is not only of interest to study agency, that is, the ways in which people position themselves and the consequences of the positioning. For me, it is also of interest to ask why a certain person positions her or himself in certain ways, although only very tentative speculations can be presented with regard to the focus group data and my analysis of it.

Frosh et al. (2003: 39) suggested that "there is no such thing as 'the individual', standing outside the social; however, there is an arena of personal subjectivity" (Frosh et al. 2003: 39). Davies and Harré exemplified the relationship between the social and individual succinctly using the image of the mother:

Everyone 'knows' what that is, and anyone finding themselves in that role or in relation to someone in that role, knows the multiple expectations and obligations of care for children that are entailed. (...) But everyone does not know each of our personal understandings and sets of emotions connected to our idea of mother, developed out of experience of our own mothers in the first instance. And those who develop their particular concept of mother in anticipation that they will one day be positioned as mother will do so differently from someone who knows that they will never be so positioned. The way we have been positioned and have positioned ourselves in relation to 'mother', the narratives that we have lived out in relation to particular mothers mean that we bring to each new encounter with someone positioned as mother a subjective history with its attendant emotions and beliefs *as well as* a knowledge of social structures (including roles) with their attendants right, obligations and expectations. (Davies and Harré 1990: 52, emphasis in original).

That is, it is feasible to suggest that individuals, implicitly or explicitly, refer to their own experiences and images of parenthood, of motherhood and fatherhood, in discussions of becoming a parent.

Frosh et al. (2003) discussed psychoanalytical concepts and theories that could be of use when asking and suggesting why certain subject positions appear attractive to certain individuals. They stressed that the analyst's suggestions can be nothing but tentative, but that asking why is a

significant way forward in bridging the gap “between giving an account of the discourses within which subjects are positioned, and being able to offer plausible reasons why specific individuals end up where they do” (Frosh et al. 2003: 39). I will not elaborate further on Frosh et al.’s exploration of how psychoanalytical thinking could benefit the analysis because I do not apply this to the present data. Still inspired by Frosh et al., I find it interesting to ask how individual experiences, including aspects such as gender, age, and educational background, could affect individual positioning. For instance, many of the participants in the focus group data who grew up with divorced parents raised concerns about the risk of relationship dissolution. Their childhood experience of divorce gave them references to what this could mean, emotionally and practically, and it could be suggested that this experience affected their perceptions of parenthood and what parenthood may imply, and thus, their positioning. To position oneself as worried about relationship dissolution can also be a way to understand one’s deferment of parenthood and to justify it to others, which resembles Freeman’s (1993) reasoning.

Freeman (1993) proposed that the individual makes sense of the present by connecting it to the past and the future, and that this is evident in studies of individual narration. In the focus group conversations about the timing of parenthood, where the guiding questions triggered the participants to justify postponement of parenthood or to recollect their decision to enter parenthood, this way of understanding subjects’ positioning appears to be fruitful. Narratives are recollections of the past, Freeman (1993) argued, and the positioning illustrates the ways in which the narrator portrays and understands her-/himself and the life s/he lives at the moment. Thus, conversation in itself stimulates a rewriting of the self, that is, a reflection on who we are, how we live, and what we have become (Freeman 1993). The manners in which the focus group participants portrayed themselves will be explored in the empirical chapters, but a presentation of the research questions and the data is in order first.

## **Aim of study**

### ***'Family and working life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'***

As has been mentioned before, the present thesis is part of Eva Bernhardt's project on young adults' values and attitudes regarding the transition to parenthood, 'Family and working life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century'. It is a freestanding part, and the participants in the present study are not (to our knowledge) respondents in the survey sample that provided Bernhardt's quantitative data. Bernhardt's work is based on questionnaire surveys and a longitudinal approach; 2300 respondents answered the questionnaire the first time in 1999, and of those, 1761 answered also the second time, in 2003. The sample was nationally representative (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006). The focus group interviews conducted for the present thesis were centred on similar questions as those asked in the surveys, that is, on possible aspects affecting the timing of parenthood, and the value of parenthood. While the survey data can be used to look at general values, and how those values appear to be connected to certain reproductive behaviours, the focus group data are valuable in that they enable an exploration of how people reason about and discuss the timing of parenthood. It was possible for me, the moderator, to ask probe questions, to study how individuals construe opinions of themselves and others, and to look at the ways in which social interaction produces understandings and values.

### ***Research questions***

*How do Swedish men and women picture parenthood and the timing of parenthood?* This is the overall question guiding the present thesis. *How is parenthood depicted compared to the childless life? How is parenthood valued? How is the increased mean age of first-time parents explained?* These questions have guided my work, but analysis of the data generated further questions, such as: How are the ideal life course, the ideal life, and the ideal romantic relationship pictured in the focus group discussions? How is the good parent (mother and father) defined? How is the normal, preferable self perceived in relation to the transition to parenthood and in

general? My approach to these questions is a discursive one. The data have been scrutinized and analysed on the basis of the analytical perspectives presented above. Now, a demonstration of the composition and conduct of the focus groups is in order.

## **The focus group data**

My choice of data for this study was based on previous research promoting the focus group method for those interested in exploring the ways in which people reason around a given topic and how they agree with and oppose the accounts of other participants (see e.g. Brannen et al. 2002; Edley and Wetherell 1997; Edley and Wetherell 1999; Knodel 1998; Kugelberg 2000; Morgan 1997). The method turned out to be very fruitful in providing rich data on notions of parenthood and the timing of parenthood. The focus group interviews can be seen as having illuminated norms, ideals and opinions (discourses and subject positions) and the ways in which these are "advanced, elaborated and negotiated in social context" (Wilkinson 2003: 187).

### ***Composition***

The discussion in this work emanates from nine focus group interviews conducted in different parts of Sweden in 2002 and 2003 (see Appendix). All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed<sup>9</sup>, and the names of the participants are pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity. A total of 35 individuals between 24 and 39 years of age participated in the focus groups, 12 men and 23 women. The number of participants in each group varied from two to seven, and the interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. Twelve of the participants in the data were first-time parents with a child between three weeks and twenty months old. Three individuals were expecting their first child at the time of the interview. The remaining 20 were not parents. The choice to include people with no children as well as people who had recently had their first child or were expecting a child made it possible to ask slightly different questions to those who were not

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<sup>9</sup> The quotes from the interviews have been translated from the Swedish.

yet parents and those who actually had decided to enter parenthood. All participants were Swedes with no recent immigrant background.

The participants were recruited in a number of ways: some were acquaintances of friends; some were contacted through their work; some through the place where they were studying (university/college); and some through the place where they went for check-ups and parental classes after giving birth. I tried to recruit participants who were 25 years of age or older. This age restriction was based on the assumption that men and women in Sweden generally do not plan on entering parenthood much younger than 25 (although obviously there are exceptions), as the mean age of first-time mothers is approximately 29 and of first time-fathers approximately 31. The decision mirrors the aim of the thesis, which is to study notions of the timing of parenthood and of postponed parenthood.

The participants in each focus group had in common that they resided in the same area. Besides this, they had some or several of the following background characteristics in common: educational and/or professional background, network of friends and/or acquaintances, age, sex, and the experience of rather recently becoming first-time parents or of not having any children. Most of the focus groups consisted of people who were likely to meet again, due to them being acquainted, working or studying at the same place, or residing in the same town. Between the groups, the participants had varying geographical, educational and occupational backgrounds. The purpose of recruiting people with different backgrounds was to get a broad data set in regard to the participants' social, occupational and educational backgrounds and to reach people with varying experiences. Some of the focus groups contained participants living in the countryside or in small villages, some men and women residing in smaller and middle-size towns, and still others who lived in what, in Sweden, would be termed large cities. Some of the participants had a university or college degree and others a upper secondary school degree. Some were students at a university/college and some were working. Two of the participants were unemployed.

The moderator's, my, presence in the focus group discussions must not be forgotten. At the time of the interviews, I was 28 and 29 years old, without children, married, and at the beginning of my PhD studies at Linköping University. This was how I introduced myself to the participants. The participants and I had common characteristics. We were

all Swedes with no recent immigrant background, and similar in age; most of the participants had experiences of vocational training at a college or of studies at a university (although not necessarily a degree), and I had resided or did reside in the same town/city/area as many of them.

### *Reflections*

Morgan (1997) argued that there are many possible ways to compose and conduct focus groups. Sampling of participants, the number of participants in each group, and style of moderating vary in correspondence with the particular purpose and design of the specific research project (see also Wilkinson 2003). The moderator's success in creating free-flowing discussions is what matters most if the focus group method is to produce rich data (Morgan 1998).

All focus group interviews conducted for the present study went smoothly and in a free flowing manner. The participants seemed at ease with one another and me. To produce such interviews, Morgan (1998) suggested that each focus group be composed of participants who have some things in common, such as educational level, occupation, area of residence, and network of acquaintances. He proposed that purposive sampling is the preferable way of obtaining such groups. Accordingly, the strategy for recruiting focus group participants to the present study was purposive sampling. A rather homogenous within-group composition, but a somewhat heterogeneous sample of groups was the result. This gave me the opportunity to speculate about what appeared to be general and local discourses and subject positions, resembling Knodel's (1998) study. However, the composition of participants did end up differently than planned, although the purposive sampling method was used. My intention was to have as many men as women in the data, but in reality it was harder to recruit men. This may indicate that reproduction and parenthood continue to be associated first and foremost with women and womanhood, as has been suggested. It could also be an effect of the fact that it was a woman, I, who contacted people and conducted the groups – a man may have gotten more men to join.

A broader sample with regard to sex, age and ethnicity could have resulted in a more varied collection of answers, that is, in a greater variety

of discourses, subject positions and subjectivities. Perhaps more effort should have been made to accomplish this, but finding participants and arranging times and places suitable to most of those volunteering to participate were time-consuming tasks, as others using the focus group method have experienced (Morgan 1998; Wilkinson 2003). In addition, and of greater importance, the data from the focus groups that had been conducted were rich, indicating achievement of 'saturation'. Morgan suggested that no more group sessions need to be conducted when the researcher starts predicting what will be said. The "goal of 'saturation'" (Morgan 1997: 43) has then been accomplished, and it is reasonable to assume that the majority of available discourses that people could draw upon in their argumentation around a certain topic, such as the transition to parenthood, have been discovered. This is not to say that other discourses and subject positions could not evolve in groups consisting of a different set of people and in other sorts of data, such as individual in-depth interviews and participant observation.

Focus groups may include strangers or acquaintances; one approach is not necessarily better than the other. But it is important to acknowledge that group discussions, that is, the data a certain group constellation produces, could also differ depending on whether the people know each other or not and whether they are likely to meet again (Morgan 1998; Wibeck 2002). In addition, for the present study, it is important to consider the influence of parental experiences on what is said (and unsaid). The parents in the sample participated in groups with other parents only, but the children varied in age from three weeks to around 20 months. Although the discussion was not focused on experiences of parenthood, these (different) experiences could impact on the positioning of the parents. Likewise, participants expecting their first child may be affected by this status in their affirmation of and opposition to different discourses and positions.

In what ways could the moderator's age, ethnicity, sex, education, accent, dress etcetera affect the focus group discussion? This appears to vary depending on the specific study (see the discussion in Frosh et al. 2002 and Gatrell 2006). A moderator whom the focus group participants perceive as different may generate more elaborate answers than a moderator who is regarded as similar. On the other hand, a moderator who is categorized as similar may create a relaxed and open climate in which the participants disclose more opinions (subject positions) and personal

experiences. Either way, all (focus group) interview data are fruitfully seen as a co-construction of the interviewer and the participant(s) (Frosh et al. 2002: 48; Mishler 1986). Different participants probably perceived me and the other participants in the interview in varying ways. The participants seemed relaxed overall, and I did not detect any differences between, for instance, men and women in how they related to me (see Gatrell 2006).

## ***Conduct***

### *Guiding questions*

A focus group interview, as any other interview, can be more or less structured. The focus groups in this study were conducted in a less structured way. Less structured groups are commonly centred on fewer questions than structured groups, and the moderator's role is to facilitate discussions around broad topics rather than trying to get direct answers to specific questions (Morgan 1998).

The following questions guided my moderating of the focus group discussions: Why do you think the mean age for first-time parents has increased when comparing the 1970s, with a mean age of approximately 23 to 25 years, and the early 21<sup>st</sup> century with an average age of approximately 29 for women and 31 for men? 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? What do you know about the parental leave system and family allowances? Will you/did you calculate the cost of having a child before trying for one? What do/did you think about you/your partner being pregnant? What do/did you think about the delivery? The questions were not asked in the same order in the groups, but the first question above was the first asked in most groups. In some groups, I began by asking whether entering parenthood was regarded as important, followed, if necessary, by probing for why and why not. Some questions were brought up by the participants before they were asked; some did not appear interesting to the participants to discuss, while others were recurrently referred to; still others were raised in the focus groups and not included in my original version of questions to ask. For instance, there was no specific question about possible affects parenthood could have on a

couple's romantic relationship, but this turned out to be a dominant theme. This reflects my ignorance prior to the interviews of how significant this subject was to the focus group participants.

The benefits of the focus group method, which for instance Morgan (1997, 1998) illuminated, are evident in the present study. The participants were often forced to reflect over their positions, to elaborate on and motivate their answers, and to discuss issues they previously, as it seemed, had not thought much about, and so was I. While some of my questions to the groups were never broadly discussed, such as the one about the parental leave allowance and monetary costs of having children, others were initiated by the participants, such as the one about the romantic relationship and the ideal family.

### *Reflections*

Some participants are more prominent in the focus group data than others are. This is a common feature of group interviews and perhaps particularly of less structured ones. Smithson and Brannen (2002: 21ff) pointed to this and suggested that “dominant voices” are relevant to consider. One focus group interview may be dominated by the accounts of one person, and this person may obstruct the purpose of the interview, that is, to stimulate discussion. It is important to ask whether some participants are given precedence while others are silenced and how this could affect the outcome of the data (Smithson and Brannen 2002). When moderating the focus groups, I tried to direct the discussions in cases where one participant appeared to dominate, in accordance with Smithson and Brannen's suggestions. I was also careful with the words I used. I tried to avoid terms such as boyfriend/girlfriend – terms that could indicate that heterosexuality was assumed, and I did not take for granted that parenthood is something everyone desires. Regardless of my considerations, however, some participants talked more than others. Some were also articulate in ways that made them easy to quote. The result is that some participants are rather predominant in my quotations of the data while others, unfortunately, are quite indiscernible. However, being ‘neglected’ in representations of interview passages does not mean that these less quotable individuals were not as important as any other participants in the overall data analysis, that

is, in the scrutinizing of discourses and recurrent and nonstandard positions.

There are many factors influencing the outcome of a focus group interview, but all the same, the focus group method is valuable in that it has the potential to entail a rather comprehensive mapping of “discourses presently in circulation” (Freeman 1993: 198), and to distinguish the local (or individual) positioning from what appears to be more common ways of arguing (Knodel 1998; Kugelberg 2000; Morgan 1998). Parenthood and the timing of parenthood are possible to discuss from many angles. That is, many different questions can be asked to promote discussions of these topics, and the questions may engender different answers. Asking about reasons for postponing parenthood initially in the interview may cause a predominant orientation towards the negative aspects of parenthood; the participants try to understand and motivate their and others’ behaviour – the deferment of parenthood. The present work has produced many ‘explanatory models’ of deferred parenthood; it elucidates predominating discourses on parenthood and the timing of parenthood. But it also covers the benefits of parenthood, as the participants describe them, and much else, such as notions of the ideal life and the ideal self.

### *Co-constructive aspects of focus group data*

The focus group method “facilitates group discussion” (Wilkinson 2003: 185). That is, the moderator is to “actively encouraging group members to interact with each other. This interaction between research participants is a key feature of focus group research - and the one which most clearly distinguishes it from one-to-one interviews” (Wilkinson 2003: 185, emphasis in original). I will go on with an example of what kind of argumentation and social interaction one of the focus group questions could generate. The interview passage is taken from a focus group containing of four new mothers between 27 and 39 years of age with upper secondary school degrees, residing in or around a small town in southern Sweden, and me, at the time 29 years. The group met in May 2003. The interview passage is taken from the first half of the interview but this is not one of the first questions that I asked – the discussion had been going on for some while.

Disa: Why do you think people today enter parenthood at an older age compared to what people did in the 1970s (...)?

Vendela: I think there are so many opportunities today. You prioritize so many other things. Travel and, yes there is much you may want to do first, compared to how it was before.

Jennifer: I've worked and I've travelled, and then it was having children that I hadn't done so.

Anita: Well, there are greater demands for education these days as well, aren't there? You need a job. Many may focus on career first, thinking that there will be time for children later. And then perhaps you study for a longer period of time today than before.

Jennifer: Yes, work was what was most important for me, but suddenly, when I was made redundant, then – hadn't I been made redundant, then there may not have been a little Alma, actually, then work wasn't of greatest importance and I stood there without a job and it became clear to me that the time may be right [to try for a child].

Disa: What do you say Agneta? How did you and your partner think?

Agneta: Oscar has wanted children. He's wanted children for quite some time (...), but I've had so much else, I've got horses and like I've prioritized my interests. I've sort of been thinking that I don't have time for children, that it doesn't fit, who would care for the animals, no I want to do that myself, so I thought that it won't work. But then you had to take that, you had to think that what happens happens, and it turned out great, she came along. (Vendela 39, Jennifer 36, Anita 27, Agneta 29; parents, FG4<sup>10</sup>).

This interview passage gives an indication of the variety of ways in which postponed parenthood could be explained: new opportunities, travel, work, education, high demands, and leisure time activities. The alternatives exemplified in this particular quote are, however, all parts of the wider reasoning that other things are prioritized first, before parenthood, as Vendela spells out initially. This, doing other things first, is depicted and defined as a dominant theme in the data. The interview passage is also an example of how the participants (try to) understand themselves and others in the course of the interview, and of the co-constructive aspect of the data.

The first question I asked is a general question and some of the

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<sup>10</sup> FG stands for focus group, and the number, 4 in this case, is the number of the group as the groups are presented in the Appendix. The age of each quoted participant is included in the brackets and it is noted in those cases where the participants are parents or expecting their first child.

participants answered in a general way (Vendela and Anita), while others referred directly to themselves, such as Jennifer. Agneta has less of a choice to take a general or private position after my specific question about how she and her partner reasoned. This question frames Agneta's positioning not only by encouraging a private account, but also by indicating that parenthood is a decision made between partners and not the woman's choice alone. (It was presumably me trying to ask questions in line with anthropological demographic theorizing, where it is stressed that fertility is something social and socially negotiated.) Jennifer, however, has more of a choice to speak generally about postponed parenthood, particularly after Vendela's opening, but she refers to herself and continues to do so also after Anita's general account. Anita may have picked up on Jennifer's initial statement, and Jennifer, in her turn and by her positioning, affirms Anita's suggestion that work and career cause people to wait with having children.

This interview passage epitomizes the data overall in that general/public and private accounts appear and are mixed in the discussions. Thus, the data do not support Smithson and Brannen's (2002: 15) suggestion that focus groups tend to generate "public accounts" while individual interviews produce "private accounts", but are rather in accordance with, for instance, Morgan (1997) and Wilkinson (2003), who argued that focus group discussions have a great potential to generate private accounts, also about sensitive topics such as the timing of parenthood and related issues (see also Överlien et al. 2004).<sup>11</sup> Rather, personal experiences and details are usually shared when the participants are interested in the topic of discussion, and the moderator has to be aware that group discussions may stimulate such self-disclosure and that some participants may regret being so open (Morgan 1997; Wibeck 2002). The participants in the focus group data were open about personal experiences and feelings, but I did inform them of the risk of self-disclosure at the beginning of each interview, and asked them to consider what they wished to share and not to share with the group.

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<sup>11</sup> Still, individual interviews have a clear advantage for the researcher interested in biographies. A person in an individual interview is given more time to share his or her ideas and experiences, with little risk of interruption, and may say other things than s/he would do in a group interview (Frosh et al. 2002; Morgan 1997).

### *The focus group method and demographic research*

The focus group method is far from new in the research on family planning and reproductive behaviour (Knodel 1998; Randall and Koppenhaver 2004; Wilkinson 2003). Although demographic studies have a tradition of being predominantly quantitative (Greenhalgh 1995), "(q)ualitative data are used in attempts to get closer to understanding 'why' people behave in certain ways and their own representations of their rationales" (Randall and Koppenhaver 2004: 58). But analyses of qualitative data may be directed by essentialist questions, where respondents' answers are taken at face value (Wilkinson 2003). Randall and Koppenhaver's exploration of qualitative research within the demographic field concludes that "(i)n general, quotations are reproduced as 'facts' or 'actual' perceptions or attitudes, rather than those that the respondent may have chosen to enunciate on that day at that time" (Randall and Koppenhaver 2004: 65). This becomes less of a problem with the theoretical framework that has inspired my analysis. Discourses and subject positions are regarded as situated *per se*, and the subject and subjectivity (including values and attitudes) are looked upon as complex, multiple and varying. The study of talk and language, social interaction and subjectivities, is the main focus here. As has been explicated above, language, discourse, is regarded as constituting meaning rather than as being a 'tool' people use to communicate opinion and values. By studying discourse and subject positioning we look at the variability of discourses that influence people, without producing general conclusions about when certain discourses mirror certain practices.

In the poststructuralist tradition, the researcher, as well as the informant, is constituted by discourse – by the surrounding society. The research product is the researcher's interpretation of the data and the world as s/he sees it, and is thus formed by her/his experiences (Hollway 1989; James et al. 1997; Riley 1997; Scheper-Hughes 1997; van der Geest 1998). There is no objective research or researcher. When outlining the focus group interviews, when conducting them, and when analysing the data, I worked with the discourses available to me – the language I have to make sense of the world. Most of those discourses are available also to the focus group participants. The difference between them and me, as I see it, is that I

have the power to present my interpretations as research, but also that it is my objective as a researcher to illuminate and discuss what we take for granted and the meanings we attach to certain concepts, such as family, parenthood, and childhood. My mission as a researcher is to detect the meanings that influence us and to ask questions about the possible consequences of certain discourses, subject positions and subjectivities. It is my role, as I see it, to speculate about why a certain person positions him/herself in a certain way at a certain moment. The theoretical framework presented above has helped me in doing this. Together with many of the studies that were discussed in the introductory chapters, the theoretical framework presented above has provided me with discourses and positions that I find attractive to draw on in the analysis and presentation of the data. I will now introduce the reader to a brief demonstration of the analytical process, before turning to the empirical chapters.

### ***Themes and discourses***

The present analysis has evolved after transcribing the focus group interviews, reading the transcripts repeatedly, concurrently with absorbing previous research on related topics, writing conference and seminar papers and thesis chapters. The complexity of the data has emerged through the process, and I dare say the analysis has advanced.

The analytical process began with me detecting prominent themes in the focus group interviews, while moderating the groups, when transcribing the discussions, and through reading the transcripts repeatedly. New themes appeared, and the themes came across as more and more complex the more I read and worked with the transcripts. Some themes were specifically related to the questions guiding the focus groups, such as 'when the time is right' and 'body matters', while others were not. When I worked with the data, the themes that appeared were, besides those just mentioned, themes that I named 'the ideal life course', 'the ideal life', 'the nuclear family', 'motherhood versus fatherhood', 'the value of the child', 'the childless life', 'life as a parent', and 'the impact of friends'. The themes became the foundation on which I started to outline the structure of the thesis and the analysis.

Concurrently with detecting and analysing themes (and reading and

re-reading previous research on reproductive behaviour and lives in contemporary Western societies), prevalent discourses appeared and came to direct the analysis further. When scrutinizing the discussions of a certain theme, such as the ideal life course, when the time is right, and the family, it became evident that there are different, often contradictory discourses that direct and permeate them. The nuclear family discourse; the discourse on (good) parenthood, including images of motherhood versus fatherhood; the discourse on individualization; and the discourses on change and continuity, are some with which the reader will be familiar after having read the entire thesis. The present analysis illuminates the prevalence of different discourses, how these discourses often turn out to be contradictory and hard to balance, and individual strategies for solving the dilemmas that contradictory discourses cause. And this takes us to the 'third' step of the analysis.

The analytical approach of my study has been to look at how the interviewees illuminate and portray certain phenomena and how they position themselves in the focus group discussions. The detection of themes and discourses was mostly centred on the focus group level, but when scrutinizing the discourses further, and given my orientation towards subject positioning theory (e.g. Davies and Harré 1990), the positioning of specific individuals appeared, adding further complexity to the data and the analysis. The subject positioning analysis illuminated resistance to and negotiation over, as it seemed, predominating ideals; it made evident alternative ways to picture matters – the options within the discursive structures, so to speak. In addition, the analysis of individual positioning made clear the complexity of the subject. It showed that individuals may waver in their positioning towards different discourses. They may both affirm and resist a certain notion. But the analysis also elucidated the uniqueness of the individual. That is, individual experiences and attributes appear to have a significant impact on the positions that a certain person embraces and opposes. Although showing inconsistency in individual position, the subject positioning analysis also indicated a certain degree of consistency. How do the focus group participants picture the ideal life, the ideal self, the ideal (timing of) parenthood and the ideal childhood? This, among other things, will be explicated in the following chapters.

## 4

### **The ideal life course**

A life comprises certain age-related phases, such as childhood, youth and adulthood. The meanings of these phases, what it means to be a child, a youth, an adult or an old person, are socially constructed and changing, but different life phases are related to each other, in that meanings and practices of a particular phase are constructed and understood in relation to other phases. Political, economic and social circumstances tend to standardize people's lives and life phases (Närvanen and Näsman 2004).

Previous studies have suggested that an extended period of education and precarious labour market conditions are important aspects that cause young adults in Europe to postpone the transition to adulthood (Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995; Nilsen and Brannen 2002). In addition, one prominent notion is that (young) men and women should do a lot of things before 'settling down'; there should be a phase in life characterized by 'freedom' and 'independence'. Obtaining a post-upper secondary school degree is one thing, but perhaps more important is 'self-fulfilment', that is, having a career and earning money, travelling and spending time on leisure activities, as well as experiencing not only new countries, but also different people and partners (Brannen and Nilsen 2002; Jensen 2003; Kugelberg 2000; Sandström 2002). This coexists parallel with the influential notion of what signifies adulthood. In addition to independence and autonomy, which are regarded as strong indicators of being competent and complete, that is, a "full person" and "a full member of society" (Blatterer 2005: 12), adulthood has traditionally been defined in terms of stability: stable work and steady income, stable accommodation, a stable intimate relationship, and entry into (the stable condition of) parenthood (Lee 2001). Brannen, Kugelberg, Das Dores Guerreiro and Smithson (2002: 127) suggested that postponed parenthood is a strategy that facilitates the accomplishment of doing 'all these other things' before 'settling down'. With Lee's reasoning in mind (2005), social status is achieved by acting independently and

performing separateness for quite an extensive period in life. Subsequently, normalcy is sustained by preferably, eventually, accomplishing the conventional characteristics of adulthood, that is, living with a partner, having a job and a stable income, and entering parenthood (see Blatterer 2005: 4).

The focus group participants reasoned very much in accord with these, as it seems, dominating discourses on what signifies a good life and a preferable life course. The data contain empirical examples of how different individuals position themselves in relation to these discourses – how they draw upon them and use them, both in the affirmative and in challenging ways. The chapter shows also that different positions are attractive and available to different individuals. In this chapter, notions of the ideal life course are discussed. The focus group participants categorize life in phases. They talk about life before parenthood and life after becoming a parent, about the ‘young life’, the ‘adult’ life, and life during old age, and about people, including themselves, as immature and maturing. All empirical chapters include these elements. The exploration in this chapter focuses primarily on how the ideal life course is depicted and discussed. I demonstrate how the focus group participants praise life with no child, discussions of the age at which a transition to parenthood is portrayed as being suitable, and how the entry to a new phase, the phase of parenthood, is talked about as a continuation of normalcy. The chapter presents an exploration of discourses about what a life should include.

## **Life before parenthood**

The ideal life course as it is predominantly portrayed in the focus groups, involves ‘doing other things first’ and then entering parenthood. That ‘wanting to have done other things first’ is a common response among Swedish young adults is supported by findings from other studies (see Bernhardt 2000a, 2000b; Brannen, Kugelberg, Das Dores Guerreiro and Smithson 2002; Statistics Sweden 2001a; see also Överlien and Hydén 2004). But what does this mean, and to whom does it apply?

### *The self-fulfilling phase of independence*

When analysing the data, it became clear that many things are included in 'having done other things first'. Training, hobbies, travel, clubbing and partying, socializing with friends, meeting and getting to know a partner, studying and working are included in the answers. To accomplish what one wishes, as it is frequently argued, one must be independent and free, and this freedom is defined as being responsible for no one but oneself. It is stated that a person experiences life and gets to know oneself by doing 'other things', and the period is described as rather extensive. The following quotes exemplify how participants, by drawing on this way of arguing, explain postponement of parenthood. The reader is already familiar with the account of Vendela from the methodological chapter.

Vendela: I think there are so many opportunities today. You prioritize so many other things. Travel and, yes there is much you may want to do first, compared to how it was before. (39, parent, FG4)

Joel: For me it's lack of time. There's no time to care for a child. I go here and there, I travel back and forth, I work as a volunteer, I've got studies, thoughts. There's no time for ten years I reckon. (26, FG5)

Vendela and Joel are two individuals in two different focus groups, who live very different lives and have different experiences and interests. The way they argue in the quotes above represents well the general argumentation in the focus groups when the participants, as they recurrently do, refer to 'having done other things first' before entering parenthood.

I chose to illustrate this way of reasoning by quoting Vendela and Joel, who are in different phases in life and who throughout the interviews portray themselves differently, but all the same appear equally influenced by this predominant idea. Vendela and Joel are different in sex and age, and while Joel has no child, Vendela recently had her first. Joel is in vocational training at a university college; before, he studied at university, worked, and was a proficient athlete. At the time of the interview, Joel is single and lives by himself in a big city. Vendela, who is on parental leave, has worked since she graduated from upper secondary school, for more than 20 years at the same workplace. She lives in a small town with her boyfriend,

with whom she has been together since she was 16, that is, for 23 years. The lives of Joel and Vendela look different, but their explanations of why the transition to parenthood happens in one's 30s rather than one's 20s concur.

An account made by Angelina, a first-time parent in yet another group, amplifies the quotations of Joel and Vendela. Angelina draws upon the notion of 'finding and getting to know the right partner' concurrently with the notion of 'having done things first'.

Angelina: Well, first and foremost you have to meet the person you want to have a child with. And you never know when that's going to happen. Now it has happened, well you know when it's right. And then you want to do things first. Like we wanted to get to know each other properly and then travel and do all this you want to do, and then it was time [to have a child], after five years. (...) So that's how we were thinking. Or that's how I've been thinking from the beginning. And Jacob, my partner, didn't want a child too early either since we wanted to travel and to explore life. (32, parent, FG2)

Experiencing different partners, meeting the right one, getting to know this person and 'doing other things' together are portrayed as being ideal before a transition to parenthood throughout the focus groups. The time it takes to 'experience life' with a partner and to get to know one another is, however, not set. It is individually defined and appears to be partly dependent on the number of years that have been spent on doing other things first, before meeting the right partner. It is also a matter of the partner's notion of whether the time for doing other things first has been fully realized or not. Vendela, for instance, 39 years old and a first-time parent, had wanted to enter parenthood many years before her partner wished to do so, and explains this with her partner wanting an extended period of prioritizing interests and 'other things'. In addition, she speculates about her partner being afraid of the responsibility that parenthood entails – the notion of having done other things first is not enough to explain the long postponement her partner's wish to wait caused. She does not criticize or question her partner in the interview, she rather tries to understand him, and in the data, she is not alone in referring to the notion of fearing extended responsibilities, nor in explaining deferred parenthood by referring to the partner's or one's own desire to extend the

period of doing other things first.

### *The good life*

The life a childless person lives (life before parenthood) is depicted to be a time of self-fulfilment, that is, a time to get to know oneself and to, as Angelina put it, 'explore life'. In the focus group participants' reasoning, no restrictions are related to this kind of life; it is a life characterized by possibilities – the freedom to do what you want. It is talked about as an easy life filled with happy times. To me, it reflects Lee's (2005) argument that the notion of independence – the self-reliant, self-made individual – greatly impacts on people in the Western world, on their strivings and subjectivities. The adult, self-reliant life entailing responsibilities only towards oneself is proven accomplished by the participants' emphasis on having done other things first and being a 'free' person. The participants draw on components of the individualization discourse, as I see it. Dan and Eva's discussion is, to me, in accord with this<sup>12</sup>.

Dan: Up till I met Sonya I had no thoughts about having a child. (...)

There were other values in life that were important.

Disa: What kind of values are you thinking of?

Dan: Unfortunately, egocentric ones. That you and the one you live with have a rich life; do good, fun things, have an interesting job and meet lots of fun people. (...)

Eva: (...) I think that's what drives most people today, egocentric reasons regardless of whether you have a child or not. Even though I've wanted a child at some stage it's exactly the same reason for me [not having a child earlier], to be able to make my own decisions when you want and without being directed by anyone else but yourself. (...) We live in a time of extreme egocentrism and fulfilling yourself, and thus you have children later.

Disa: You said you want to fulfil yourself. What do you mean by that?

Eva: Well partly to get an education, your stability and your work and your salary and your accommodation, but also having time to travel and to hang around in pubs for ten years and I mean there's lots [to do], at least for me, because those things are fun. (Dan 36, Eva 38, parents, FG8)

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<sup>12</sup> Eva and Dan are acquainted, but not a couple.

Eva mentions different aspects included in fulfilling and focusing on oneself, being independent, free and the master of one's life – the individualization discourse, as I term it. Education, stability, work and accommodation are mentioned, but of equal, or perhaps greater, importance is “having time to travel and to hang around in pubs for ten years” and “being able to make my own decisions when you want and without being directed by anyone else”. This is how Eva and Dan portray their reasons for postponing parenthood. Both of them had completed university degrees in their mid-20s and had worked since, and thus, as Vendela and to some extent Angelina also, they had quite a number of years to account for between the accomplishment of the standard adulthood criteria that Eva enumerates and the time when they had their first child.

The participants refer in the affirmative to the notion of having done other things first; they most commonly embrace the discourse on living an independent, self-fulfilling life. Regardless of whether they are talking about five, ten years or more of wishing to live this kind of ‘independent’, ‘self-fulfilling’ life, this position is unproblematic and “untroubled” (Wheterell 1998: 390). For many participants, it is the primary way to understand their own postponement of parenthood. Eva, for instance, met her husband rather late in life and was living without a stable relationship for many years. In the interview, she refers to the nuclear family discourse and says that having a child by herself was never an option – she had to find someone she wanted to live with – love first, then a child. But she does not understand her postponement of parenthood as a consequence of not finding a partner; she reflects over this but draws the conclusion that she would still have waited with parenthood, regardless of her civil status, owing to the reasons she mentions in the interview passage above.

The data overall, that is, the general predominance of the affirmative position ‘having done other things first’, underpin Jensen’s (1996) suggestion that parenthood competes with a childless lifestyle, in which money and time can be spent not only on housing, work and education, but on leisure, hobbies, and commodities, rather than on a child. Jasmine, Cleo and Sarah’s dialogue and the citation of Amanda epitomize Jensen’s argument.

Jasmine: But you like the way you live today

Cleo: yes, I love this life

Jasmine: but you can't live like that if you have a child, really. And you don't know if you're going to like the life you get.

Sarah: And you can't change your mind. (Jasmine 28, Cleo 28, Sarah 30, FG1)

Amanda: It has a lot to do with you having such a good life the way you live, so there's no feeling of missing out on anything. You travel, you've got a career, you go back to studies for a while, you've got friends. Maybe you don't have to fill your life with children? I don't know. (31, FG3)

The exploration so far has shown that it is common to refer to the childless life as a good life, filled with self-fulfilment and the freedom to do whatever one wishes, that is, to travel, party, socialize with friends, educate oneself, work, and to spend time on leisure and hobbies. As Amanda thoughtfully states in the discussion of not rushing into parenthood: "there's no feeling of missing out on anything. You travel, you've got a career, you go back to studies for a while, you've got friends. Maybe you don't have to fill your life with children?" This corresponds well with Kugelberg's (2000) focus group study on Swedish men and women, ranging from 18 to 30 years, talking about their futures. Kugelberg noted that "It seemed to be a general view that one needs many years before having children to have fun and to be free, to be together with friends, to develop oneself, to find out what education and jobs one wants, to gain experiences and competences. This seems to construct the ideal model of young adult life and to follow a desired life course" (2000: 40).

### *Partying, travel, and hobbies*

Many participants bring up partying, and spending time and money on restaurants and clubs as essential aspects included in 'having done other things first'. Partying, and going out to restaurants, pubs and clubs are most often connected with spending time with friends and meeting new people. Travelling, mainly abroad but also in Sweden, is recurrently referred to as a taken-for-granted ingredient in striving for self-fulfilment. Travel and 'pubbing' appear to epitomize freedom and mobility in terms of having no

responsibilities towards anyone but oneself – the ideal of the independent individual, as Lee (2005) called it. Travel in particular seems to be a strong symbol for having explored life and oneself. When analysing the focus group talk, I would like to suggest that both travel and clubbing are used as ‘water proof’ confirmations (to oneself and to others) that life and the self have been explored and things accomplished. The following excerpt is one example of talk about travel. It is drawn from a part of the interview in which the participants discuss why the average age of first-time parents has increased in comparison to the 1970s.

Harry: Prolonged education in combination with the fact that there’s so much to do nowadays, because I’ve been travelling a bit and there’s a lot you feel you want to have accomplished. You shouldn’t say that you can’t do it later [after having a child] but it’s quite convenient to do it before, to be totally free so to speak.

Michael: I think most people think like that, that you want to do things before you have a child. That was probably not the case in the past.

Disa: And then you mean travel and education?

Michael: Travel above all, I think.

Caroline: That’s how it was for us, anyway. (Harry 31, Michael 28, Caroline 29, parents, FG2)

Harry starts by giving a general answer to my question, and then transitions to more private reasoning about how he wanted to travel and accomplish a great deal before becoming a parent. For Harry and Michael, in the interview passage above and in the interview overall, these accomplishments do not appear to be connected to education or work, but rather to leisure time activities. Caroline is cohabiting with Harry and supports Michael’s account that travel is a primary reason why parenthood has been deferred, in the quotation above. Michael and Harry have worked since they graduated upper secondary school and have no extensive period of higher education to refer to – their emphasis on travel and ‘other things’ thus appears cogent.

Travelling as a parent, with a child, is described as being possible, but something that requires another sort of planning and thus a different sort of travelling; the needs and well-being of the child are then the first priority. It is also mentioned that entry into parenthood probably results in money being prioritized differently, with less to spend on vacations of this kind. However, not all focus group participants include travel and partying

in 'having done other things first', and this is emphasized more in some groups than in others. There is only one person who openly objects to the idea that one must travel (abroad) before parenthood, and this is Maja (26, parent, FG2). Thus, while some focus group participants emphasize travel and partying when they describe important aspects of life with no child, others accentuate hobbies and leisure time instead or as well. This may include interests such as horses, motorbikes and training. The possible implications that parenthood may have for social relations, hobbies, and other leisure time activities are commonly highlighted as a concern.

### ***Studies and work***

Maja (26, parent, FG2) is the youngest parent in the focus group data and she has a three-year university college degree. It was getting this degree and working afterwards that Maja stresses when talking about important aspects to accomplish before parenthood. Other focus group participants, in Maja's group, accentuate travelling to quite a great extent, and this could partly be the reason for Maja's open reservation – she cannot identify with the prominence given to overseas travel, as it seems. Maja appears to feel the need to justify her decision to enter parenthood comparatively early; she brings this up and tries to understand herself in comparison to the other participants' different positioning. She mentions the difference in age between her and her partner as one reason for having a child comparatively young; her partner did not want to be an old parent, as she describes it. In addition, she refers to experiences of relatives having problems with conceiving a child, and talks about this as having influenced her and her partner. They decided to start trying for a child in case it took some years to get pregnant. Maja is influenced by and draws upon the discourse of having children at the right age, that is, not too young and not too old, and the risk of infertility. By bringing up these reasons, Maja justifies, to herself and others, her decision to enter parenthood 'young'. The interview context and Maja's positioning thus effectuate her understanding of her actions and need to defend them (see Freeman 1993; Morgan 1997).

Participants like Maja, who had college or university degrees or were studying at the time of the focus group interview, include post-upper secondary school studies in 'having done other things first'. Some refer to the time spent on higher education more as a means to an end – obtaining a

good job and a stable income, such as Maja (26, parent, FG2) and Ursula (25, FG5). Others, such as Eva and Dan (38 and 36, parents, FG8), talk about studying as a period in life of partying, self-fulfilment and freedom. Those who had worked mainly after upper secondary school particularly stressed partying, travel, meeting the right partner and/or hobbies as being important ingredients in life before entering parenthood. Some also explicitly mention work, such as Jennifer (36, parent, FG4). Work and education are, however, in no way emphasized to the same extent as are spending time and money on hobbies, training, travel and/or socializing/partying.

## **Negotiating life course and age**

### ***To 'live life': a rule more than an option***

The focus group data strongly indicate that 'having done other things' is something a person is supposed to do – it is a predominating notion. Living life in a certain way before parenthood could thus be interpreted as less of a desired choice and more of a societal and social expectation; it has turned into the standardized life course (Närvanen and Näsman 2004), as it seems. But a few focus group participants question this ideal. Jasmine is one of them.

Disa: Why do you think people today have children later in life?  
(...)

Jasmine: There's so much more you should do today, travel and such as well. You're supposed to have a career and you should, I don't know.

Disa: That's how you feel, pressured in a way, or?

Jasmine: yes, I think so. (Jasmine 28, FG1)

It has been demonstrated above that a common way of arguing is that there are many opportunities today – that there are many things a person wants to have accomplished before parenthood. A few refer to higher educational demands and the need to get a job, but demands are seldom connected to 'having done other things'. Jasmine, however, does so. She

stresses 'should' in the account presented above – “there's so much more you should do today”. She exemplifies first with travel “and such”, and then with career – “you're supposed to have a career”. Her positioning and accentuating of should and suppose triggered me to question, in a confirming way, if she feels pressured, and she replies in the affirmative. This position is attractive to her; by questioning the ideal, an ideal she affirms by her questioning, she justifies her own subjectivity and experience of, although working, not being focused on career, nor on education, and, as it seems to me, also not on travelling to the same extent as the others in the group. Her statement is, however, not unchallenged. Sarah (30, FG1) picks up the line after Jasmine's “yes, I think so”, by saying: “And you want to, above all. There's so much to do nowadays”. Jasmine does not reply to this and the discussion of this topic peters out at that particular time in the interview.

In another interview Nathan (26, parent-to-be, FG7) takes a questioning approach towards self-fulfilment and 'having done things', similar to Jasmine. He argues that deferred parenthood is the result of the ideal of fulfilling oneself, through leisure time activities but also through studies and work. Nathan is himself about to complete a degree in medicine. He reflects over his own studies and refutes the idea that his choice of degree is about feeling a calling or being passionate about medicine or helping others – to him, he states, being a physician is just a job, like any other job. This position supports his opposition to the self-fulfilment ideal. At one stage in the interview, when the increased mean age of first-time parents is discussed, Nathan states:

Nathan: I believe, and this is based on nothing else but a feeling, I think that it's not about having a hard time finding a place to live and the like, that's subordinate to you wanting to fulfil yourself so damn much, partly by studying, that you're not prepared to get a job straight away, so that's why [people defer parenthood]. So really it's about us living in such good circumstances that we have so much time to fulfil ourselves. (...) you're supposed to be passionate about your work, to be passionate about things. It may be good, I don't know. It's a bit performance driven. It's not ok to be dissatisfied and to have a dull time. (26, parent-to-be, FG7)

Nathan and Jasmine both question the dominant notion of how to live life. By doing this they substantiate the prominence and influence of this

notion, a notion that is also evident in other studies (Bernhardt 2000a; Brannen et al. 2002).

### *To 'live life' later*

The time of self-fulfilment and independence, and all the aspects included, is sometimes referred to as 'living life'. Some focus group participants argue that 'life can also be lived' when the child/children are grown up. That is, the life course can be turned around – a person can live 'family life' first and then the life defined by individual self-fulfilment. In this way entering parenthood early in life becomes an alternative.

Emma: I mean these people who had a child when they were 18, they perhaps sort of gather their friends now, 'and now we're going away and that's going to be great', and you turn life around a bit. If you have a child early - the ones in our age who had children when they were perhaps 18 - they have older children now, so now they can sort of go partying any weekend and go away. We may start our family life now, and we had ours. (...) That's how it is, you choose either to have a child early or you wait feeling perhaps that you want to live life before having children. (Emma 28, FG1)

Emma talks about 'family life' and 'to live life'. In this argument, and similarly in the data as a whole, life cannot be lived with children. Or rather, 'living life' is not connected to parenthood but to a childless life. Parenthood is connected to 'family life' – another sort of life. Emma does not portray people who have children young in denigrating terms, contrary to many other participants in the interviews. She points to an alternative way of organizing life, as also Alice (33, FG5) and Toby (30, FG9) do. These participants support the preference for entering parenthood young. Alice exemplifies with her own life, when she opposes the notion that it is preferable to 'live life first' and then enter parenthood.

Alice: But I think the opposite, as well. I mean, I guess the ideal is to have a child when you've got your education and a permanent job, but I also feel that I'm 33 and when I've finished my degree I'll be 35 and then I may want to work a couple of years before having children and well, then I'm 37, 38. I guess many have children at that age, but I think the opposite. Imagine me being 33, getting this education now

but already having two children. That would be ideal. Not financially, naturally, because clearly you want financial stability and all that, which is a bit trickier when you study but, but I think the opposite. Absolutely. (33, FG5)

To Alice, the alternative of having children first and then doing self-fulfilling things is an appealing one, at least when she looks back on her life and compares it to the present and future. To her, now, being at the beginning of a college degree at 33, having a couple of children already would have been the ideal. Alice pictures and understands the present and the future by connecting it to the past; she rewrites the self during the course of the interview, as Freeman (1993) would put it. Alice presents another kind of life course than what is predominantly emphasized in the data. Having done other things first is generally presented to be the ideal. Emma, Alice and Toby's presentation of an alternative life course is not consistently rejected, nor is it commonly affirmed. However, none of the individuals who introduce the possibility of 'living life later' excludes 'having done other things' as something insignificant. Thus, a self-fulfilling period in life is still pictured as vital by most.

### ***Parenthood and age, adulthood and youth***

#### *Not too young*

The focus group participants generally emphasize that becoming a parent early in life (as a teenager or in one's early 20s) is to be avoided. This line of argument is part of the discourses on good parenthood and the ideal life course. Examples of acquaintances and friends who had children young are often referred to in the negative. Ursula and Mona's dialogue illustrates this. In the excerpt below they elaborate their arguments after having stressed that attaining higher education is one explanation of why parenthood is postponed.

Ursula: And it seems to be quite hard to have a child at an early age, and like you said [referring to another participant], it's the same in my little hometown that the ones who have children [young] they work in the supermarket and sort of don't do anything really, they just are. I think that may happen, that you don't deal with things later on either.

Mona: It's the same thing where I come from, and it's [the town]

pretty big, but it's similar. Some of the people who've had children don't seem to have many visions in life. I don't know. It's a bit narrow minded, depressing almost. (Ursula 25, Mona 24, FG5)

Ursula and Mona suggest that the big risk of entering parenthood early in life is that "you don't deal with things" in life, 'you just are', which connotes something negative, at least something far from the ideal. Staying in the same small town, having no ambition with regard to work and education are to them negative characteristics. They raise themselves by taking this position, and they justify their choice to attain higher education and move away. They are, as Mauthner and Hey (1999) called it, 'doing difference'. That is, they value and categorize themselves and others through their positioning. Harry does the same when taking a similar position. He, however, expresses it in a slightly different way, without belittling small town life. Doing so would have meant depicting himself derogatively, as he continued to reside in the area where he grew up. This is not to say that people cannot be self-critical; they do and often are when they, through their positioning and narration, try to understand themselves and the life they live (Freeman 1993). In the present data, however, there are more indications of people justifying their positioning and actions, in line with Mauthner and Hey's (1999) argumentation. Harry argues in the following way when depicting one of his reasons for postponing parenthood.

Harry: I've got some friends who had children early and I've seen how they've changed, in my eyes in a negative way. They became very odd and inhibited somehow and now they can almost say 'oops, it was probably a bit too early'. (...) No I think that we, Caroline and I, are like the Swedish expression 'just right'. (31, parent, FG2)

To Harry, who is 31 and has a partner who is 29, this is the right age to enter parenthood. His and his partner's reproductive behaviour is apposite, in that they comply with the Swedish mean age for first-time fathers and mothers.

In the focus group interviews, it is commonly stated that a suitable age to become a parent is around 30 rather than 20. This is not a surprise, as most participants are around 30 and no one is younger than 24. Their definition of the right age for entering parenthood legitimates their own

behaviour. The normative and judgmental evaluation of younger parents is, however, worth considering. It tends to be a culturally dominant notion that one should not enter parenthood 'early'. The discourse on age may thus have an impact on procreative decision-making. In one of Kugelberg's studies (2000: 42), for instance, a couple of Swedish women in their early 20s indicate that they feel pressured to follow the expected life course and to have children later in life. They state that a person attains high status by having a child around the age of 30, while those who have children 'young' are looked upon as stupid.

In the present focus group data, the notion of the right age to enter parenthood is found also in utterances by participants who are relatively young, such as Maja (26, parent, FG2) and Nathan. Nathan is 26 years old with a pregnant partner (and the pregnancy planned). The discourse on age appears to constitute Nathan's self-perception.

Nathan: I've been thinking about feeling a bit younger than I am, when I've told people [about the pregnancy], that someone would say 'really, oops', at the antenatal clinic and such. 'Really, and how do you imagine this will work out? You see, it's serious now'. But no one has reacted that way, only 'what fun' and that's it. So there's a bit of a difference in how you see yourself, perhaps. (26, parent-to-be, FG7)

Thus, the notion of being too young for parenthood has had an impact on Nathan. It appears to have effectuated feelings of being young, perhaps too young. This is how I interpret Nathan when he talks about how he thought people would react to his age and deem him a bit too young to become a parent.

Glen, 24 years old and participating in the same group as Nathan, also draws on the discourse on age. He pictures himself as too young, too immature and with too much to accomplish in life before becoming a parent and states that the image of him having a child at the same age as his parents, around 24, is inconceivable. In addition, he strongly objects to the desire of his younger brother, 21 years old, to have a child. He thinks this is crazy and talks about his brother being "way too immature, despite him having permanent work and all that". But the third participant in the interview, Max, 26, sees things differently. He does not regard himself as too young for parenthood. On the contrary, he longs for children. His mother, on the other hand, is according to Max, of another opinion. "She

has never been positive about me having children when I've been speaking to her about it, because she thinks I'm too young. Even though she and dad had children at my age", Max says.

That reproductive decision-making could be affected by cultural notions about 'the right age' seems feasible to me after analysing the data. This is supported by other research projects (Kugelberg 2000; Statistics Sweden 2001a). Why, then, do men and women in their 20s feel too young and why are they pictured by others as being too young? The following section continues the exploration by discussing the meanings of adulthood and youth.

### *Adulthood and youth*

Meanings and markers of adulthood are significant aspects to consider in understanding ideas related to the timing of parenthood. Adulthood is a changing, negotiated term with different meanings in different contexts; it is socially defined (Das Gupta 1997). The focus group data illustrate the dynamic, negotiable side of age, young, old, and maturity; the meanings of being too young and too old for parenthood vary and are culturally and socially situated. Some participants in the focus group data mention their unrealized anticipation to enter parenthood around 20. Angelina (32, parent, FG2) says she started to look forward to a transition to parenthood ten years back. This is similar to how Cleo and Emma (28 and 28, FG1) express matters. But due to a range of individual and common reasons, possibly partly because they felt too young or felt that others regarded them as too young, the transition was deferred. Several other participants, as has been shown previously, argue that they feel/felt too young and too immature to embark on parenthood. They talk about not feeling adult enough. Brita puts it the following way:

Brita: I don't know, it sounds funny but in the past when my parents were perhaps between 20 and 25, it's like they felt, perhaps felt they were more grown up because they had permanent work and they lived in much larger homes than what you did yourself at that age, and so on. So their world was more established in that way, and if I look back at myself being 21, 22 (...) yes, I know I didn't feel I was grown up in a way that I could be a mum. Then I thought more that perhaps when you are between 25 and 30 you are as grown up as our parents perhaps

felt when they were 21. Em, so it's, at the age when my parents had children I didn't consider children at all, it was sort of, it wasn't on the agenda, when shall I have a child, or like that. It was more about if I should travel or study or what I'd do. (28, FG6)

Brita intertwines reasons such as housing and stable work with personal feelings of readiness for parenthood, in the account above. This could be seen as support for Hobcraft and Kiernan's (1995) suggestion that work, education, housing, and partner are preconditions for the timing of parenthood – that is, of feeling ready and mature, and for Närvanen and Näsman's (2004) argument that political, economic and social circumstances tend to standardize people's life courses and transitions to new phases. But it can also be explained in discursive terms. That is, Brita draws on and understands her own and others' behaviours and feelings through the discourses on good parenthood and good childhood. Good parenthood in the cultural context in which she lives connotes stability, and stability – a settled life – is connected to adulthood (Blatterer 2005; Lee 2001). In the contemporary Western world, notions of adulthood are influenced by what took shape in the 1940s and onwards, in an era of economic growth when people got permanent and life long occupations and relationships were stable. Economic independence, stable work, stable relationships and family formation – the model of “standard adulthood” – came to define adulthood and have continued to do so (Lee 2001: 7-14). As Brita's account indicates, the focus group participants define adulthood in accordance with the standard model, but put parenthood in the forefront of what leads to adulthood. Parenthood is, or rather should be, a marker of adulthood and maturity, as it is expressed in the data. Thus, there is a strong correlation between adulthood and parenthood, perhaps first and foremost in that parenthood implies new and extended responsibilities to individuals other than oneself, and that adulthood is very much connected to such increasing obligations.

Being an adult means having responsibilities. Parenthood accords with the definition of standard adulthood in that (responsible) parenthood is described as requiring a more settled lifestyle, in terms of a partner relationship, income, work and accommodation. Feelings of being an adult, of being grown up, are also closely connected to a settled life. The opposite is the life of ‘the young’ – the independent, free life with responsibilities only for oneself. This life tends to be ascribed higher status than standard

adulthood, in the focus groups. Max puts it as follows:

Max: I think it has lots to do with this that you. The ideals are not really to be a parent. Or rather, you should be a parent but that's not what's most important. Very, very important for all is to have been young some time in life, in your 20s. Like you should have travelled, you should have had some temporary jobs, and such. Studied at university. So you sort of don't have time before you're 30. (26, FG7)

The depiction of how life should be lived has been demonstrated above. The focus group participants put considerable emphasis on living the 'young life', preferably but not exclusively before parenthood – they draw on the notion of 'having done other things'. 'Young' in this respect is not connected to biological age. Young means living a certain life, a life free from obligations. The meaning of parenthood, closely connected to the standard version of adulthood, does not coincide with this definition of young, as previous studies have also indicated (see Brannen, Kugelberg, Das Dores Guerreiro and Smithson 2002). The participants, however, do try to combine parenthood and 'youth'. For instance Nathan (26, parent-to-be, FG7) stresses that a person may be young and also a parent, but another may behave in a dull, adult way although childless. By stating this Nathan portrays himself as being able to stay young despite his forthcoming entry into parenthood. In another focus group, consisting of first-time parents (FG2), parenthood is talked about in the affirmative in that it keeps the parents active and younger in comparison to people who do not have children (see also FG1). The key to staying young is thus to become a parent. By portraying matters in this way, the parents justify their decision and life, just as participants without children, such as Max above, justify theirs. The content of the arguments concurs: being and staying young (that is, amongst other things being socially active and flexible) appears to be what counts.

However, entering parenthood and living a more settled life is regarded as a significant indication of normalcy in the focus group data. At the end of the day, being a parent and 'young' may be more accepted than living a 'young life' without children. Jonathan (29, FG5) puts it the following way when answering my question about why parenthood is desirable.

Jonathan: I have a hard time seeing myself as a father, actually. (...) But at the same time I know that sooner or later it would feel pretty good to have a little junior. But that has more to do with gliding into the next phase in life, so to speak. That you've finally stopped being a teenager, and no matter how old you are, you may get a little son whose toys you can play with (29, FG5).

Jonathan talks about “gliding into the next phase”, and parenthood is commonly referred to as entering a new or the next phase. As Jonathan expresses it, the entry to parenthood puts an end to “being a teenager”. But, as has been suggested above, having a child is also talked about as enabling the continuation of a ‘young’ life, to some extent – “no matter how old you are, you may get a little son whose toys you can play with”, Jonathan says. It appears to be a common understanding in the data that when a person has reached a certain age, s/he can only behave ‘childishly’ if s/he has a child. Parenthood is thus not only connected with adulthood, it is also being positioned as a refuge from adulthood.

The standard version of adulthood influences the focus group participants and the picturing of parenthood, but living the ‘young’ life is described as what generates personal maturity and, perhaps most importantly, as Blatterer (2005) put it, as what gives social recognition. As others have pointed out (Bauman 2001, 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002), social recognition and success in the Western world today are largely dependent on the ability to be flexible and mobile, and to adjust to new circumstances and relationships when necessary. A pertinent example is the focus group participants’ depiction of life without children as a good, happy, and unrestricted life characterized by ‘freedom’. This kind of ‘self-involved’ freedom comes across as highly appreciated.

## **Entering parenthood and sustaining normalcy**

The idea that the individual has the capability and possibility to make choices and in this way forms his or her own life is highly influential in the contemporary Western world (Beck and Beck Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1991). The transition to parenthood is consequently referred to as an

individual choice, in much demographic research and by my focus group participants. The individualization discourse is evident, that is, people picture themselves as being independent, masters of their own life. In the focus group discussions conducted for the present study, the decision to enter parenthood is referred to as being an individual decision, but there is also a line of argumentation and positioning that indicates that the transition to parenthood is regarded less as an individual choice and more as ‘that’s how you live life’ and ‘that’s what you’re supposed to do’; parenthood is included in the normal life course and any deviation from this life course is regarded as abnormal. Becoming a parent at some stage in life is described as giving a person the status of being (becoming) normal. This taken-for-granted aspect of parenthood is explicitly illustrated in the following dialogue:

Disa: How do you feel about having children? Is it something important to have in life, is that how you feel, or is it not that important?

?: It’s important to me.

Sarah: Yes, clearly it’s important.

Jasmine: in the future, it’s important. Not today, like.

Disa: No, but sometime in life? Or? Perhaps you’re not sure? You may not be.

Sarah: I’m not sure.

Cleo: Well, yes. Both. Yes. I want to have children, but, at the same time, no I don’t know. But still, it’s something so taken for granted, I think that you, like there’s this opinion in society that you should have a child.

Jasmine: But I don’t feel that it’s something I have to do, it’s more like it’s so matter of fact so you don’t think much about whether you want to or not, you just should.

Emma: That’s how it’s supposed to be.

Jasmine: sort of. I don’t know.

Cleo: I don’t feel that I have to, personally, no. But that’s how it is, you’re supposed to have a child.

Jasmine: that’s how it works, in some way.

Cleo: And that’s why I want to as well. (Sarah 30, Jasmine 28, Cleo 28, Emma 28, FG1)

This excerpt is a good example of how the focus group participants often vary in their positioning, that is, how opinions are elaborated and modified throughout the discussion in relation to available discourses. The

first immediate response to my question about whether having a child is important in life is yes. Then, however, my comment about the possibility of not being sure opens up alternative positions. Sarah, for example, is suddenly not so sure, and neither is Cleo. In the accounts to follow, the focus group participants state that an entry into parenthood is so taken for granted that they do not really reflect over whether they want to or not. As Jasmine says “that’s how it works” and Cleo responds “and that’s why I want to as well”.

For women the social pressure to become a parent may be greater than for men. As discussed in chapter 2, previous research suggests that womanhood is more connected to motherhood than manhood is to fatherhood (Bekkengen 2002; Phoenix and Woollett 1991; Stoppard 2000), and it has been indicated that the transition to motherhood is not always the voluntarily choice it has often been described to be (Sevón 2005). But parenthood as a taken-for-granted transition predominates also in focus group discussions including men. Max, Glen and Nathan (FG7) reason in the following way:

Max: It’s expected of you to have a family and to want to.

Glen: To reproduce your genes and sort of.

Disa: Is that what’s expected?

Max: Yes it’s expected.

Disa: That’s how you feel, or?

Nathan: Of course you do, because.

Max: Yes. Yes of course. You sort of react when people are in their 40s and don’t have children, who [as a couple] have lived together for a very long time. Well ‘why don’t you have children?’ It’s sort of not right to choose not to have a child.

Glen: I, I feel a bit that I react in that case like God it’s a bit tragic – they never had children. And it can’t be fun when you get older, like. Maybe not as much that we have to think about the birth rate in society, Christ, but more like it’s just, yes tragic for people who don’t have [a child], for those individuals.

Max: They are a bit like losers, people who don’t have children.

Glen: Yes. Or perhaps not like losers but, like it must be awfully dull.

(Max 26, Glen 24, Nathan 26, parent-to-be, FG7)

The men, in particular illustrated by Max, position themselves strongly in the affirmative regarding parenthood being a phase that is included in the normal life course. They state that the societal expectation

is that one will enter parenthood at some stage in life, and thus this is how they look upon their future. The nuclear family discourse is prominent in their argumentation as well as in other focus group discussions about the normalcy of parenthood. It is primarily when people have stable partners that entering parenthood is expected and childlessness is regarded as deviant when one nears 40. Max talks about people without children as losers. Glen puts it differently. He does not portray childless people in denigrating terms. Instead he pities them, and talks about not having children as a tragedy; a childless life is referred to as a dull life in this reasoning. All the same, Glen's position substantiates the normalcy of parenthood as much as Max's does. It is more common to talk about childlessness like Glen does, as something sad. Brita's positioning (28, FG6) is another example of this. She argues that people without children are viewed with sympathy due to the notion that a childless status indicates failure to conceive more than anything else. Brita says, "because I believe most people think it's natural [to enter parenthood], the most natural thing in life, or with life". This "systematic overestimation of the involuntary character of childlessness" (Bernardi 2003: 543) is also found in a study of women's talk about parenthood and fertility in Northern Italy (Bernardi 2003).

The normalcy of parenthood is confirmed when participants in my focus group data refer to reactions to voluntary childlessness. Lisa (32, FG6) says "I know that many people look down on them, so to speak, because they don't want children. That 'don't they have any feelings in their bodies' sort of". In some focus groups and by some participants, people who have never wanted to become parents are referred to as odd, and old people without children are mentioned in pitying terms. At the same time, there is a reflection over the social pressure to have a child. This pressure is referred to as being very influential in the decision-making process concerning whether to have a child or not. It is brought up in several interviews how hard it is for people who do not live up to this expectation, either because they have problems conceiving a child or because they do not want to become parents. Official statistics support the focus group data in showing that having a child is a strong norm in Swedish society. During the past century, Swedish women have had two children each on average, even though period fertility has wavered, and the proportion of childless women has been relatively low, between eleven and

seventeen percent (Departementserien 2001; Statistics Sweden 2002a).

## Discussion

### *'Having done other things'*

Previous studies indicate that Swedish young adults have high demands concerning what they should have accomplished before entering parenthood. In addition to a stable income, satisfying accommodation and education, they wish to spend time and money on leisure activities, commodities and hobbies (Bernhardt 2000a; Brannen et al. 2002; Statistics Sweden 2001a). Jensen (1996: 88) suggested that parenthood competes “with other arenas of satisfaction which are valued by adults”. This appears apposite when comparing with the focus group data. ‘Having done other things’ is recurrently brought up and affirmed, and appears dominant in people’s subjectivities. That is, a preferable way for most participants to portray the self is as someone who wishes to ‘explore life’ and to ‘accomplish things’ through hobbies, leisure time, travel, socializing, education and work, although a few reflect upon and question this ideal.

The childless life is pictured in the data as a busy, public life, on the move. Travelling, socializing, having hobbies, and partying seem to engender self-value and social status, to the same degree as, and in some situations even more than, education and career do. Some participants put more emphasis on travel and partying, some on studies and some on work. Many refer to hobbies and spending leisure time with friends. Meeting the right partner, getting to know each other and exploring life together is also frequently referred to. Most focus group participants include several of these aspects in ‘having done things’. They talk about ‘having done things’ as something connected to self-fulfilment, and the accomplishment of self-fulfilling activities is dependent on freedom and mobility, which are defined as having responsibilities for oneself only. This kind of childless life is also referred to as ‘living life’. That is, living life means being free and independent, something a person cannot attain as the parent of dependent children. Parenthood is referred to as a restriction, in this line of argumentation.

### *Social age and the timing of parenthood*

In one Swedish study, finding oneself to be too young was one of the most common answers to the question on why parenthood had been deferred for men and women between 23 and 37 years of age (Statistics Sweden 2001a). For those who feel they are too young, or feel others regard them as too young, the transitions to parenthood could be more infused with anxieties and worries than it otherwise would be. A study on Finnish women and their decision to become mothers gives a slight indication of this (Sevón 2005: 472, 475), and in the present study participants often refer to themselves as feeling or having felt too young and too immature to embark on parenthood. The timing of parenthood is thus related to (social) age and subjective feelings of maturity. The ideal 'having done other things' may contribute to the fact that many participants position themselves as feeling immature. That is, their notions and feelings are constituted by the ideal that many things should be accomplished before parenthood if a person is to feel ready for the transition. Concurrently, the discourse on adulthood impacts on people's subjectivities. When "standard adulthood" (Lee 2001: 6-10) crystallized after World War II, the conditions were very different from the situation for young people of today. The 1950s and 60s were times when practices corresponded to a high degree with norms and values, but it became harder for young people to meet the criteria for adulthood in the decades that followed (Blatterer 2005; Lee 2001). No longer do the standard markers of adulthood coincide with the social reality. Today employment is increasingly uncertain, the demands on higher education are more extensive, and divorce rates are high as well as the number of people moving to new neighbourhoods and towns.

Blatterer (2005) proposed that we should talk about a new adulthood (rather than prolonged adolescence), which is formed by the changed political and economic context concurrently with the traditional notion of standard adulthood. Thus, young adults are subjected to a "tension between new practices and old norms" (Blatterer 2005: 22). There is tension in the focus group data, to be sure. The participants come across as ambivalent towards the concept of adulthood and the classic markers of when adulthood has begun. The data indicate that the primary signification of adulthood is parenthood. The reason for this is that parenthood entails

(new) responsibilities for another individual that are unique to the parent-child relationship. In this respect, parenthood means the end of freedom and independence, these seemingly highly valued aspects of life.

But parenthood is also depicted as engendering a refuge from adulthood that only adults who become parents can obtain. That is, parenthood justifies a partial regression and gives one an opportunity to experience childhood and youth yet again, through and with the child. Is picturing parenthood as a means to regress a strategy for suppressing the seriousness of parenthood (and adulthood)? Parenthood is a negotiated category, socially defined and appropriated, in line with Townsend's (1997) suggestion. The focus group data illuminate this. But what is of particular interest to note, in my view, is the general devaluing of adulthood, of adulthood as a term and as a marker of a settled life, and in comparison to the life of the young (adult). It is the 'young' life phase, characterized by mobility and freedom, that is praised. But why is this? Is it uncertainty about being able to accomplish and maintain the classic markers of adulthood that induces feelings of immaturity and a reluctance to portray oneself as an adult? Is it the promotion of flexibility and mobility in the labour market that has had an impact on people's subjectivities and that constructs social status in terms of being independent and free?

### *Institutionalized individualism*

Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995, 2002) argued that the neo-liberal economic and political climate forces individuals to be flexible. Labour market demands have impacted people's subjectivities, in that individual freedom, independence and mobility act as guiding principles of life for contemporary Western adults. They refer to this as institutionalized individualism. The individual is regarded as the master of her/his life and it is up to her/him to make the right decisions and to bear the consequences. Making choices is mandatory, and biographies are understood as the outcome of individual choice rather than as something steered by structural conditions. In this respect, the notion of the individual is institutionalized (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Lee 2005; Nilsen and Brannen 2002).

Structural constraints are seldom brought up in the focus group

data, although there are references to unemployment and possible difficulties with getting work. The participants affirm the individualization discourse by emphasizing individual opportunities, individual choice, and individual independence. Similar to Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) and Hochschild's (1997) arguments on what entails social status and self-respect, participants in the focus group data picture 'public' accomplishments as symbolizing a self-fulfilling life.

However, parenthood is still important. Most people anticipate an entry into parenthood at some stage in life (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006; Departementserien 2001; Goldstein et al. 2003). The focus group data suggest that entering parenthood constitutes practicing the standardized life course, and that those who never have children are regarded as deviant. However, just as deviant are those who act as if becoming and being a parent is the most important aspect of life. That is, women as well as men, mothers as well as fathers, appear to attain social recognition mainly by engaging in public activities and by, as Lee (2005) and Hockey and James (1993) put it, performing autonomy and independence. It could be argued that the Swedish welfare state facilitates this positioning, and has a great part in forming it. Since the 1960s, men and women, mothers and fathers, have been politically promoted to participate and to maintain their participation in the labour market even after becoming parents. Individual taxation was introduced in the 1970s also for married couples, and the parental leave insurance, unemployment insurance and the general health insurance are individually based on previous earnings. In addition, housing allowances and generous student loans facilitate financial and 'social' independence for young adults in that many can afford to move away from the parental home at a comparatively young age, 'doing other things first' (see the comparison between different European countries in Brannen et al. 2002). Thus, as it seems, the individualization discourse is institutionalized to quite a great extent in Sweden on a political, economic, social and individual level. An exploration of this and discussions on the timing of parenthood continue in the following chapter, to which we will turn now.

## Being ready, secure and mature

At the beginning of the 1990s, demographers noted a continuation of the fall in birth rates that had proceeded from the late 1960s onwards in the Western world. Sweden, however, was at the time a country with comparatively high fertility (Statistics Sweden 2003a). Why were Swedish young adults more eager to enter parenthood than those in other Western contexts, such as Germany, Italy and Spain? As was discussed in the introductory chapter, many researchers have pointed at the Swedish welfare system with its paid parental leave, available childcare, and other generous family benefits (Esping-Andersen 1999; Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995; Hoem 2005; Löfström 2001; McDonald 2000; Vogel 2001). This system enabled the combination of paid work and parenthood, or rather motherhood, which in turn stimulated fertility, it was argued. But in the 1990s, fertility dropped in Sweden as well.

A large body of demographic research has looked at how welfare benefits, income, and employment affect the timing of parenthood and fertility rates.<sup>13</sup> Swedish survey data and official statistics show that students are the group least prone to enter parenthood, and that this group expanded between 1987 and 2000. Between 1987 and 1998, fertility decreased for the temporarily as well as permanently employed, but for women over 30 years of age, fertility rates were stable, regardless of employment status (Statistics Sweden 2001b). Actually, unemployed people with income insurance were more prone to enter parenthood than were other groups in the 1990s (Statistics Sweden 2003a), and for women, the likelihood of having a child appears to increase with time in unemployment (The National Social Insurance Board 2001).

Other studies, however, have found employment and a stable

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<sup>13</sup> See e.g. Corman 2001; Hoem 2005; Hoem and Hoem 1987, 1997a, 1997b; McDonald 2000; Oláh 2001; Stanfors 2003; Statistics Sweden 2001a, 2001b, 2003a; The National Social Insurance Board 2000, 2001.

income to be significant preconditions for entering parenthood (Statistics Sweden 2002b), and of particular importance to women (e.g. Bernhardt 2000a; Hoem and Hoem 1987; Statistics Sweden 2001a; The National Social Insurance Board 2000). But a 'stable' income is gained in different ways in Sweden, although based on the person having worked. A person who has worked six months is entitled to paid parental leave based on those earnings, and to sick leave insurance. A person who has worked twelve months is entitled to unemployment insurance. A person who gets an income from the unemployment insurance and has a child is entitled to parental leave insurance. In this respect, the Swedish welfare system guarantees a comparatively stable insurance, as long as the person has entered the labour market and has worked for a year. But most Swedish people do not enter parenthood after having worked a year only, and it is generally agreed that aspects other than employment and a satisfying income affect the timing of parenthood (e.g. Bernhardt 2000a, 2000b; Statistics Sweden 2003a). It is important to note, I believe, that the preconditions for entering parenthood are socially constructed and vary over time and space. They intertwine with notions of, for instance, the value of life, good parenthood and an auspicious childhood (Kertzer and Fricke 1997; Basu and Aaby 1998; Greenhalgh 1995; Handwerker 1986).

This chapter looks at how the focus group participants reason about the decision to enter parenthood. How do they define when the time is right? Two discourses appear in the discussions, as I see it – the extrinsic circumstances discourse and the intrinsic conditions discourse.<sup>14</sup> The participants refer to extrinsic circumstances such as employment, income and housing, when they reason about aspects affecting their decision to enter parenthood. I look at how they draw upon and position themselves in relation to these reasons. In addition, they refer to intrinsic conditions, such as feelings and desires, as being important aspects affecting the timing of parenthood. Elements of other discourses appear in the reasoning. The standard adulthood model, for instance, is evident in the extrinsic circumstances discourse, and elements of the individualization discourse appear in talk about intrinsic conditions, that is, how the 'inner' feeling of

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<sup>14</sup> Having a stable relationship before trying for a child is a criterion that is brought up recurrently in the focus group discussions. That is, referring to the nuclear family in the affirmative is a predominant position, although not unchallenged. This subject, however, is scrutinized in the following chapter.

readiness is achieved. The discourses affect each other and elements of them are intertwined; some participants draw more than others do on extrinsic circumstances and some more on the intrinsic conditions line of reasoning.

## **Being ready and secure**

### ***Work, income and material standard***

#### *Employment and housing*

The focus groups' reasoning about parenthood is influenced by the notion of standard adulthood. All aspects of the standard model of adulthood, which for instance Lee (2001) explicated, are not necessarily included and affirmed in the positioning of every participant, but entry into parenthood is generally connected with a settled life in terms of a stable relationship, stable income and accommodation suitable for 'family life'. Stable employment is referred to as something significant in that it provides the security that enables one to provide for the child. Men and women reason along similar lines in regard to this – that is, women as well as men position themselves as being responsible for financially providing for the child, in accordance with Bernhardt's (2005) result and the dual-earner family model that is prominent in Sweden (Björnberg 2002).

The importance of having a stable income of one's own – in this respect being independent from one's partner – is talked about by some focus group participants in relation to the potential scenario of separation. Others do not put the same emphasis on stable employment. Nathan (26, parent-to-be, FG7) and Alice (33, FG5), for instance, take the position that stable employment may not be a necessary requirement for entering parenthood. In regard to their argumentation, and their experience of being a university/college student, being a student, with a low but stable income, a student loan, is sufficient for parenthood, although, as Alice points out, perhaps not ideal. Others refer to stable employment as something that gives financial security, but that may be hard to combine with parenthood owing to long working hours and shift work. Five focus group participants

refer to work as a (possible) hindrance to parenthood. Two of them, Glen (24, FG7) and Liam (25, FG5), both of whom are students at the time of the interview, bring up the idea that work may be hard to combine with parenthood in their future lives – there may not be enough time for an equal commitment. Liam’s future position may require shift work and he speculates about how this could affect his parental practices in case of separation – would he, in this scenario, be able to be as involved as he would like? Sarah (30, FG1), on the other hand, refers to her present situation with a work shift that to her is inconceivable to coordinate with parenthood. Having a child would force her to change jobs, something she refers to adamantly. In another interview, Sabina (29, FG9) says that her previous job as self-employed was a hindrance to parenthood in that work took too much time. She understands her deferment of parenthood as being partly a consequence of this.

The focus group discussions on the right time to enter parenthood shed light on questions such as: How is life preferably lived as a parent? What are good parenthood and a good childhood? I believe that discourses related to these questions underlie the participants’ positioning in discussions about employment, income and material standard. Specifically, what a person regards as suitable employment conditions, income and housing for parenthood intertwines with the (good) parenthood/childhood discourses and the individual’s interpretation of these. But it is also affected by circumstances such as the availability and cost of childcare. There may, for example, not be any childcare centres open for children whose parents work evenings, nights and weekends; private arrangements may be regarded as too expensive, and thus current employment conditions may prevent entry into parenthood. However, what becomes clear after analysing the focus groups is that people waver in their positioning towards the standard adulthood/parenthood model and towards the importance of issues such as stable employment. Julia (29, parent-to-be, FG9) is one example.

Julia is three months pregnant. She and her partner Noah were both unemployed when they started trying for a child, and Julia says that she was taken by surprise when she got pregnant so soon after she stopped taking the pill. In the quote below, Julia reflects upon her anxiety about being unemployed as a parent-to-be:

Julia: I felt a bit anxious, or perhaps not anxious but it was hard not having a job. I would have liked to have that. Yes, it feels like it's quite nice to have a job when you get pregnant. Security-wise no one gets, like there is a security net that catches you anyway, but I'd prefer to know the conditions, to have a security first. But I didn't have that, but it worked out anyway, luckily. (29, parent-to-be, FG9)

Julia was offered a temporary position soon after she got pregnant. She had worked previously and was entitled to unemployment and paid parental leave insurance, as was her unemployed partner. In this respect, she and her partner had some financial stability when they decided to try for a child. Julia refers to the social security system as a reason for not feeling worried about financial aspects, but continues to stress that a job engenders another sort of security, regardless. Julia and the other participants in the same group connect the timing of parenthood with employment to quite a great extent, compared to the other groups. That is, they refer a great deal to employment conditions in their reasoning when they try to understand deferment of parenthood. They do waver, however, in their positioning. They affirm the notion that stable employment is a central precondition for deciding to embark on parenthood, but they also undermine this kind of argument. Julia, for instance, says she felt anxious about being unemployed and that a job was important for feeling ready for parenthood, but she also informs us that she stopped taking the pill at a moment when she and her partner were both unemployed. She also refers to the social security system as a reason for not feeling concerned about financial matters, as do other participants in other groups.

I find it reasonable to suggest that the standard adulthood/parenthood model impacts on Julia's (as well as other participants') positioning. By referring to feelings of anxiety when unemployed, she portrays herself as a responsible becoming parent whose preferences are to provide the child with a settled, financially secure life – a life she provides by having a job. In addition, I would suggest that a job symbolizes independence. A person who positions her/himself as ignorant of financial stability may be regarded as irresponsible and lacking in common sense. It may be of particular importance to Julia, who is pregnant and a parent-to-be, and who was unemployed when she became pregnant, to position herself as having had concerns over her status as unemployed. When the discussion continues on in the focus group, Julia emphasizes her

position on work. Sabina affirms Julia's position but amplifies it.

Julia: When you think like family, you'd rather have a job. (...) If you plan, like we're at this age when you talk about having a family and how you'd like it to be, and having a job is an important part. You've got a security in that.

Sabina: In particular if you've bought a house, then you need the security of having a permanent job, at least one of us, otherwise it's risky. You don't want to leave the house, or feel that you can't afford it. (Julia 29, parent-to-be, Sabina 29, FG9)

Julia connects work with security and Sabina does not question her. Sabina, however, adds "in particular if you've bought a house". Sabina states that permanent employment is of particular importance when a house is purchased, to reduce the risk of having to sell the house. Later on in the interview Julia amplifies her position on work, perhaps being influenced by Sabina's argumentation.

Julia: We've got a house, we've got a car. It was this thing with the job but it worked out and if it hadn't and both of us had been unemployed it would have been ok anyway because we've got everything ready. Because somehow you strive for this, like we've been talking about stability. You imagine how you want to live when you are ready to have a family and then you look a lot at how you grew up. All of us grew up in a house, and then I think you automatically think that's what you want to have, the house and the car. (29, parent-to-be, FG9)

In this account, Julia argues that having a house and a car was more important than having stable work. Sabina argues along similar lines. She takes the position that a permanent job is significant in that it enables the right sort of accommodation for parenthood. In the interview, Sabina strongly rejects the idea of raising a child in an apartment or in a semi-detached house. A freestanding house is her ideal, and she and her partner have strived for and recently accomplished this ideal.

However, at the time when Sabina and her partner Tobias (30, FG9) bought their house and participated in the focus group, neither had a permanent job. Their employment status contradicts Sabina's positioning elsewhere that a permanent job is essential when purchasing a house. But Sabina justifies her and Tobias' actions by talking about "panicking a bit" –

they want to fulfil the preconditions for entering parenthood, that is, to have an income that allows them to live in a freestanding house.

Sabina: Now you're sort of panicking a bit, that you want a job and move to a house, since that's our picture of it. (29, FG9)

Sabina and Tobias stress that it is easy to get work in the area they live in, if only temporary, as long as a person is not "too picky". By stating this, they show that they are responsible individuals; they will be able to obtain a decent income from work and thus to afford the house, although neither of them has a permanent position at present.

Living in a house in a small village/suburb or in the countryside constitutes parenthood as they would like it, in regard to Julia's, Noah's (26, parent-to-be), Tobias' (30) and Sabina's discussion (FG9). They refer to their own upbringing as the model to copy. Their own childhood experiences presumably form their current subjectivities and positioning (Davies and Harré 1990), and the participants make sense of their present preferences by referring to recollections of the past (Freeman 1993). They talk about their childhoods as being good childhoods, growing up in freestanding houses in calm areas close to nature. They wish to provide that kind of childhood for their children.

Some participants in other groups talk about material aspects such as a good income, a bigger place to live and a decent car more as a strategy to make parenthood easier, rather than referring to notions of what signifies a good childhood. Amanda is one. At the time of the interview, she lived with her boyfriend in a one-bedroom apartment in a big city. She reflects over her affirmation of parenthood being connected to a larger accommodation and higher material standard.

Amanda: I think it's about me wanting to be as prepared as possible, sort of. It's going to be hard anyway. It has to be, well, damn convenient. There should be a door you can close, to go to bed if it's whiny. Or, I don't know. Well, yes, you don't want to make it harder than it's going to be, and at the same time you know that you cannot prepare yourself enough (...) But it's also about finding excuses, I suppose, that you're a coward. Well, coward, you feel worried, yes worried, fear. (31, FG3)

Amanda wants to be "as prepared as possible" when entering

parenthood. Throughout the interview, she frequently returns to portraying parenthood as hard; she appears worried about its impact. In the quote above, for instance, she says that putting up material goals before entering parenthood is a way to find excuses for postponement. Thus, she understands her deferral to be caused by fear, and suggests that material preconditions for entering parenthood are nothing more than an excuse for deferral. Other participants reason in similar ways as Amanda, when they try to make sense of their behaviour. They talk about constructing obstacles for entering parenthood to justify the deferment of the transition (see Jasmine, 28, FG1 and Carl, 28, FG5).

### *'Non-standard parenthood'*

It is not uncommon for people to become parents in circumstances less desirable than those described as ideal. This is brought up and talked about in the focus groups. In many discussions, participants refer to friends and/or acquaintances and hypothetical situations as examples of how a person may enter parenthood at a less ideal time, such as when studying, unemployed, living in a small accommodation, early on in a relationship, and as a single parent. A common remark is that things often work out well anyway. Many mention the social welfare system as a security blanket in regard to financial issues. Lewis, Smithson and Das Dores Guerreiro (2002) confirmed the picture that Swedish young adults rely on the social security net. In the data collected here, some participants (see FG5, FG7) also bring up financial support from parents as a possible, additional assurance. It is stated (FG7), however, that this kind of support may not be available for all.

Unemployment as a reason for deferring parenthood is mentioned only a few times and then often as a general account. There are two unemployed people in the focus group interviews, Jennifer (36, parent, FG4) and Noah (26, parent-to-be, FG9) (see also Julia, parent-to-be, FG9). These participants do not present their employment status as a problem with regard to making a transition to parenthood. Jennifer, on the contrary, describes being made redundant as her incitement to try for a child, as she no longer had a job to focus on. Other studies corroborate Jennifer's story that, for those entitled to the unemployment insurance, unemployment may

entice people to enter parenthood (Statistic Sweden 2003a).

## ***Age and the risk of infertility***

### *Not too old*

That a person's age is an influencing factor in the decision to try for a child is supported by official statistics. It has been shown, for instance, that the fertility of women above 30 is less sensitive to income level and employment status than is the fertility of other groups (Statistics Sweden 2001b). For those over 30, the most common answer to why the time is right to try for a child is one's own or one's partner's age (Statistics Sweden 2001a). I have previously shown that the transition to parenthood is regarded as suitable at a certain age. The notion of not becoming a parent 'too young' was demonstrated in the previous chapter. But there is also the notion that one should not enter parenthood too old. As the author of a study on Finnish women's decision to enter parenthood concluded: "there is a very narrow right moment to become a mother" (Sevón 2005: 478f).

Angelina (32, parent, FG2) is one focus group participant who brings forward her age as significant in her and her partner's decision to try for a child. Many focus group participants, particularly women, refer to age and to getting older as an explanation for deciding to enter parenthood now or in the near future. They do so in line with other reasons. Angelina, for instance, positioned herself in the affirmative towards the notion of having done other things first and towards the nuclear family ideal in her explanation of what led her to defer parenthood. She then referred to permanent employment as an important criterion for parenthood. A permanent position gave her the security to have a job to go back to after parental leave, she argued. But a different position is taken when I ask whether private finances and the economic consequences of having a child were considered prior to the decision to try for a child.

Angelina: We didn't, didn't think about that.

Disa: But a permanent job anyway?

Angelina: Yes, not, like if you want to have [a child] I think you adjust to what you've got, so to speak. So finances never directed our choice to have a child. If I hadn't had a permanent position I still believe I would have had a child now since I'm, 31 I guess I was at the time, so I still believe, now, it, it felt right to have a child. Then

you can always go on travelling, you probably never get enough of that but (...) the idea of a child had ripened, for us anyway. We'd been together long enough and knew each other and, yes it was, it felt right. So finances are not that important, you adjust anyway, I think. I don't know. (Angelina 32, parent, FG2)

A variety of reasons for postponing parenthood are included in Angelina's answer, which signifies the complexity of the timing of the transition, but this is not what I would like to primarily illuminate here. It is interesting to see how Angelina now refutes permanent employment as an essential criterion, and justifies this change by referring to her age, "31 I guess I was at the time", and "it felt right to have a child". She connects her age and the timing of parenthood with intrinsic conditions, as is commonly done in the data. She talks about an inner feeling of wanting a child and attributes this partly to age. But she is not sure. She does what many other participants do every now and then in the conversations, she finishes her account with "I don't know". The focus group discussions support Freeman's (1993) suggestion that people try to understand themselves, and their past, present and future actions, in the course of the conversation, and that people in the Western world strive to picture the self as coherent and logical. Understanding one's own reproductive decision-making appears to be anything but easy; the participants draw on a range of explanatory discourses and positions and have a hard time portraying themselves as coherent.

### *The risk of infertility*

The upper age limit of when parenthood is preferably entered is partly related to the risk of infertility. A number of risks are brought up in the focus group interviews, and the risk of not being able to conceive a child when one wishes to is one. The potential for women to conceive does decrease with age, in particular from around 30 onwards (Departementserien 2001). It is, however, (for most people) impossible to know whether conceiving will be easy or hard, whether age matters a lot or not. Not all focus group participants appear concerned about the risk of not being able to conceive and the protracted time of conceiving, but it is brought up in every interview (without me having any particular question

concerning the matter). Infertility is a potential scenario that influences people to varying degrees and in different ways. Maja (26, parent, FG2), Anita (27, parent, FG4), and Julia and her partner Noah (2 and 26, parents-to-be, FG9), for instance, describe the decision to try for a child as being dependent on the knowledge that it may take time to conceive, feasibly several years, and thus they wanted to start ‘in time’. Julia and Noah connected this way of calculating with the desire to have more than one child. Julia was approaching 30 and to them time was running out. For these participants, as they express matters, parenthood happened faster than expected, because they became pregnant straight away. To them, the risk of infertility was an incitement to start trying for a child – this is one way in which they understand their timing of parenthood in the focus group interview.

It is stated in a governmental report on Swedish fertility that it “would be advantageous to inform young people about the significance of age with regard to fecundity. This would decrease problems with involuntary childlessness as well as those complications that deliveries at an older age result in” (Departementsserien 2001: 86, my translation from the Swedish). Many participants in the focus group data, as has been mentioned, reflected over potential problems with conceiving and often related such a problem to the woman’s age. Some of the parents, however, talked about themselves as taking parenthood too much for granted, and referred to their experiences of protracted periods of trying to conceive. They claimed that the possible scenario of infertility loomed large when months went by without getting pregnant. Stella explains this in the following way:

Stella: I felt, I felt in a bit of a panic (...) because Michel has been wanting children earlier or faster than me but. And when we finally decided then I felt this panic that I didn’t get [pregnant], that well, perhaps I may not be able to have children. I hadn’t thought like that before. (32, parent, FG2)

Stella says that she did not consider the risk of infertility until she and her partner began trying for a child. She did consider the risk rather soon, however, after not succeeding to conceive. This is similar to how Michael, Stella’s partner, Angelina (32, parent, FG2) and Agneta (29, parent, FG4) explain matters. Making the decision to start trying for a child

is portrayed as having been a prolonged, complex process, but always with the expectation that entering parenthood *per se* was easily accomplished as soon as one had decided to do so. They all got pregnant approximately six months after they began trying, but they refer to the period up to conception as an ordeal. Parenthood for these participants was realized but involuntarily postponed; to others it occurred faster than expected. For one person in the focus group data, Vendela (39, parent, FG4), fecundity problems became a reality. Vendela informs us that she and her partner had to seek help at a fertility clinic in order to conceive their child, and the process of having a child was extended.

Biological aspects, such as the possibility to conceive, are among the extrinsic circumstances that may affect parenthood, but they are more static than other aspects included in this way of reasoning. That is, the impact a certain welfare system, employment, and income have on reproductive behaviour is influenced by individual, social and cultural constructions of what a good income, a good employment, a good childhood, good parenthood, and decent governmental support are. Biology may be understood socially and through discourse, but the fact is that fecundity decreases with age, the time of conception varies, some people are infertile, and some couples cannot conceive. In this sense, biology determines fertility. But the discourse on biology – the understandings of biology – has an impact on reproductive decision-making also. Notions of infertility and age are evident in the focus group data. The participants draw upon the discourse on biology, in which the notion of infertility is included, in their explanations of the timing of parenthood.

## **Feeling ready and mature**

Extrinsic circumstances such as employment, income, material standard, age and the risk of infertility are brought up in the focus group discussions as influential aspects of the timing of parenthood. However, the intrinsic conditions discourse is predominantly referred to when the focus group participants talk about what matters the most. The decision to have a child is depicted as being due to an internal desire and maturity. This way of reasoning may emanate from the notion of individual freedom and choice

that Nilsen and Brannen (2002) discussed. That is, when people talk about themselves and their lives, they often neglect structural restraints and portray themselves as independently forming their own biographies. It may also be a consequence of the notion that a child contains emotional value (Zelizer 1985), and entry into parenthood, and consequently children, is thus not commonly connected with material aspects such as monetary costs and benefits. The following section explores the reasoning on and individual positioning in relation to intrinsic conditions as affecting desires to enter and to postpone parenthood.

### ***An immanent drive and evolving feeling***

#### ***Biological enticements***

A common way of talking about the right time for parenthood is to discuss it in relation to an inner feeling, a feeling that either is or was there as a trigger to start trying or as a nonexistent feeling that causes postponement. Sometimes this inner feeling is understood as a biological drive. Biology is referred to as something that inscribes feelings of readiness for parenthood at a certain age. This was hinted at above, for instance in the discussion about Angelina's account of age and the decision to enter parenthood. Most focus group participants say they believe (or believed before they decided to try for a child) that they will enter parenthood some time in life. The most immediate reply to the question of why parenthood is desired is that it is the normal thing to do, but second to this is that procreation is the result of a biologically contingent desire – the participants draw on the biology discourse. Immanent in this discourse is that biology predestinates feelings and, thus, actions. Ursula's account is a good example of how the entry into parenthood is initially described to be the result of social expectations, but then she quickly adds that it is also biologically triggered. Alice succinctly affirms the biological aspect and emphasizes age and time.

Disa: So why do you want children?

Ursula: That's how it is [laugh]. You're supposed to. No, but it's some sort of drive, right, or like of course you should have a child, like it's just some inner feeling that's in the body that you want to become a mum. It's a bit hard to describe what it is, why you want children. Yes, it's not like you can say that you gain anything from it but it's more that you get an incredible happiness and that you get something

that is absolutely yours and your everything.

Alice: I believe it's purely biological. Indeed, biological procreation is just there, that you want to. And that it grows on you, and the biological clock starts. Yes, I believe in that, absolutely. I believe that at a certain age there are things that automatically remind you that the time has come. It's the biological procreation. (Ursula 25, Alice 33, FG5)

Why do you want children? That is the question that Ursula and Alice reply to. Ursula enumerates a range of reasons that may bring about a desire to have a child, "that's how it is", "it's some sort of drive", "it's just some inner feeling that's in the body that you want to become a mum", "you get an incredible happiness" and "you get something that is absolutely yours and your everything". Ursula's account is filled with elements from different discourses and notions of parenthood and life, such as parenthood being an expected ingredient in the normal life course, and the desire for children as being triggered by biology. She talks about an inner feeling "in the body" that creates the desire to "become a mum". She also connects the benefits of parenthood, or perhaps rather motherhood, with intrinsic conditions, that is, inner feelings. As I understand it, Ursula refutes extrinsic benefits when she states: "it's not like you can say that you gain anything from it but it's more that you get an incredible happiness". Ursula could be arguing along similar lines as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim when they talked about the child as having great value as a forever-lasting love object and as something that is everything to the parents. A child may be a hindrance to mobility and flexibility, to career and leisure time aspirations, but parenthood implies stability and belonging in a mobile and flexible world (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

Alice picks up the biology discourse and draws predominantly on this. She connects the emerging desire to have a child with biology and age. When a person reaches a certain age, a feeling of readiness is biologically generated, according to Alice. Throughout the interview, Ursula and Alice, as many other participants in the data, take the position that once a person gets the feeling of readiness other criteria, like employment, income, and housing, become less important. Alice's strong affirmation of the notion that biology predestinates the inner feeling of readiness is 'logical' when her narration throughout the interview is regarded. Alice consistently takes the position that extrinsic circumstances matter little to her in the present

situation. She argues that she has come to an age when she is ready for parenthood – the clock is ticking.

I have previously suggested that notions about the right age for parenthood appear to have an impact on reproductive decision-making. Age is talked about as an aspect that triggers the decision to try for a child, although the desire to enter parenthood may or may not have been eminent before, and age is referred to as a reason for postponing parenthood. Age is in this respect both social and biological and internally and externally defined. A person may feel old enough for parenthood, but be regarded too young socially, or a person may generally be seen to have reached the proper age for parenthood, but feels immature and too young. Biological age is a marker of whether or not a person is at the right age to become a parent, but the marker is socially constructed and dynamic.

### *A question of maturing*

When the timing of parenthood is discussed in the focus group data the word mature is commonly used; it is applied in phrases such as being mature and becoming mature, and found in other studies in Sweden and the Western world on how men and women talk about the timing of parenthood (Bernardi 2003; Sevón 2005; Statistics Sweden 2001a). One way the focus group participants explain the state of becoming mature is to draw on the individualization discourse and the notion of self-fulfilment. Maturity and inner stability are referred to as stemming from having ‘experienced life’. Lisa portrays it the following way, although without using the word mature in this particular account:

Lisa: Like I feel that when you began to feel ready [to enter parenthood] it had to do with this that you felt stable in yourself. You feel that you’ve got something to give, and that you don’t have to put yourself in the centre but you can take a step aside, and that you’ve got experiences so you don’t panic about getting stuck with a child and getting nowhere, and that you know yourself. (32, FG6)

Lisa’s account contains many of the statements that are common in the intrinsic conditions discourse. Feeling ready for parenthood means feeling stable in yourself, it means feeling that you’ve got something to

give, feeling ready to regard the needs of others, it means knowing yourself, and having experiences “so you don’t panic about getting stuck with a child and getting nowhere”.

Intrinsic conditions, as I call it, may very well be connected to extrinsic circumstances. Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) suggested that employment, housing, income, stable partner and education are preconditions for people to feel ready for parenthood. But there are focus group participants who explicitly reject the notion that extrinsic circumstances are essentially important to people’s timing of parenthood, as has been previously shown. Jill is one of these.

Jill: For me, I could have a child now, even though I’m studying, that’s no problem. But it’s the feeling you must have. You want to feel like having a child and that hasn’t arrived yet. (...) The circumstances for having a child now are actually really great. We are both studying, admittedly, but my partner works half time as well and it’s possible to take a break from studies, and everyone, like my parents and my sister would be happy, but I, I’ve never really been fond of children so I guess it will take a while for me to want to have a child of my own. (28, FG6)

Jill has been cohabiting with her partner for five years; she worked prior to attending university. Her positioning throughout the interview strongly affirms the notion that intrinsic conditions are what determine the timing of parenthood. As she says above “it’s the feeling you must have”. Jill detaches this feeling of readiness from extrinsic circumstances. Later on in the interview, Jill responds in a similar way to the question of what makes a person ready for parenthood.

Jill: I believe for me it’s a question of maturing, for me that is. (...) That you get this female feeling, sort of, to have a child one day, that it starts to appear a little.

In this quote, Jill uses the word maturing. Her argument has similarities with, for instance, those of Alice and Ursula. The feeling of readiness is pictured as being a dormant feeling that the body awakens at some point. Jill connects the feeling of being ready to womanhood – “to get this female feeling, sort of, to have a child one day”.

Maturity is connected to the desire to enter parenthood, in Jill’s

reasoning and throughout the focus group discussions. As I have argued previously, the participants are influenced by 'standard adulthood' (Lee 2001) when they picture (preferable and good) parenthood; the feeling of being mature enough for parenthood is connected to feeling mature enough for adulthood, that is, feeling ready for a more settled life with responsibilities towards others than yourself. Jill's reasoning in the above quotes illustrates common ways in which the participants refer to intrinsic conditions when they talk about reasons to have or to wait before having a child. This is not to say that the participants exclusively argue in this way. Intrinsic conditions are referred to as well as external aspects (as has been shown). However, the decisive factor or factors are most often portrayed to be intrinsic. Stella's narration is another example of this. In the following quote she says:

Stella: I've been thinking that I want a child sometime but I haven't been like many around 20 'now I'm going to have a child' and such. No I've been like yes sometime in the future. And I'm not 20 so. No but I haven't felt before that it feels right. Not right but that you, no I haven't felt really mature until now. (Stella 32, FG2)

As so many other participants, Stella was cohabiting with her partner and worked several years before she entered parenthood. She had a partner that was more eager to enter parenthood than she was, as she portrays matters, and her partner Michel, in the same focus group, does not oppose this picture. Stella's feeling of maturity, of being ready for parenthood, took time to emerge. Stella's narrative is in accordance with those of, for instance, Dan (36, parent, FG8) and Agneta (29, parent, FG4). Dan states that parenthood was far from certain to him, and that the desire to try for a child developed slowly. He refers to meeting his partner and his partner's strong wish to have a child as being what influenced him to change. Agneta, on the other hand, says that she always anticipated entering parenthood at some stage, but without any hurry or distinct desire to do so. She portrays taking the decision to try for a child based on the following reasons.

Agneta: Well, it was this with age. You thought you were getting older. And then it suited well, both of us had work, and this that you know what you've got, you were a bit secure. Then we'd gotten

married just before because I wanted to be married before having children, I've always said that. And then it was like 'well, now there's no return', almost. No, not really but you thought it was time to give it a try, now or never sort of. (29, parent, FG4)

Agneta and her partner had been a couple for ten years before entering parenthood. Agneta draws on several discourses and possible positions in her explanation of why the time was right to try for a child. She begins by referring to her age and to getting older. Agneta then brings up extrinsic circumstances such as work as being an important criterion. She also mentions getting married, as a preference before becoming a parent.

Agneta refers to herself as someone who was never anxious to enter parenthood, not so much in the quote above but in other parts of the focus group interview. This is indicated in the above quote by her remark "and then it was like 'well, now there's no return'". Agneta's positioning in the interview indicates that she took the decision to enter parenthood not primarily due to some inner desire, but with extrinsic circumstances fulfilled (including a partner who had looked positively upon parenthood for some time) and her getting older, there was "no return".

Some participants question whether an inner feeling of readiness ever will occur, and in addition it is mentioned that criteria for parenthood such as employment, housing, education and living life first may be mere excuses for deferring parenthood (Carl, 28, FG5, Jasmine, 28, FG1, Jill, 28, FG6, Amanda, 31, FG3). Regardless of whether one has a long-term partner, a life that 'has been lived', an education and work, the feeling of being ready for parenthood may take time or fail to appear altogether. This is also pointed out in Bernhardt's study (2000a, 2000b). 'I have not desired children yet' and 'I have wanted to do other things first' are the two top answers that Bernhardt's respondents, over 30 years, give to the question of why they have not yet had children. A large proportion of them had achieved (as parenthood is concerned) a preferable accommodation, romantic relationship, work and income.

### *Choices to make*

Giddens argued that, in contemporary Western societies, uncertain outcomes have increased because there are more options for individuals to

choose and make decisions from. Knowledge is plural, decentred and questioned, and individuals are confronted with multiple possible scenarios. This has led to an increasing reflection over issues such as ‘who am I’, ‘what choices should I make’, ‘what can I expect of the future’ (Giddens 1991, 1994). With increasing amounts of risks (as Bauman 2001: 154, stated about the contemporary Western world: “precariousness is not a matter of choice; it is fate”), it is harder to decide and act in a way that is predictably successful. Passivity may therefore be the choice, “[f]or risks tell us what should not be done but not what should be done” (Beck 1994: 9).

In the focus group discussions, the underlying reasoning is that there are lots of options in life and most participants refer to this as something positive. But in resemblance with Giddens (1991, 1994) and Beck (1994) choices are also portrayed to have a negative impact on people – something that may postpone feelings of maturity, and parenthood, and cause passivity. Intrinsic conditions and extrinsic circumstances intertwine in this sort of reasoning. For instance in what Brita says:

Brita: I’m not sure, I don’t know if this has influenced me but I have read, and I believe in it, that there are so many big decisions that you have to make today as a young adult. You have to decide so many things that have to do with your future. You have to make plenty of choices, to choose where to place your retirement capital, and all these grand things that perhaps were run by public organizations in the past, and you conformed to this order and all people had about the same in the end. But today you yourself are supposed to make all these choices. This freedom of choice is really hard on people, I believe. And it comes at an age where you’re suppose to marry, maybe have children, buy a house, first time you go to the bank to lend money, all the other choices you’re supposed to make, you’re supposed to fulfil yourself at work and all this stuff, and I believe this may affect you, that you feel pressured by these external factors. And then you want, and then it feels like this little nice family that you’re supposed to look forward to, it comes when you feel that all this has sort of matured a bit. (Brita 28, FG6)

Brita enumerates a range of societal constraints on people, bound to compulsory choices and norms concerning what a person is supposed to do and feel: “there are so many big decisions that you have to make”, “you have to decide so many things that have to do with your future”, “you have

to make plenty of choices”, “all these choices you’re supposed to make”, “you’re supposed to fulfil yourself at work”, and “this little nice family that you’re supposed to look forward to”. Feeling ready and mature enough for parenthood takes time, owing to all these decisions and social expectations, Brita argues. Her account goes well with Giddens’ notion of a “colonization of the future” (1991: 111). The increasing amount of opportunities and choices to make have led to an increasing amount of uncertain outcomes, which has caused people to increasingly try to predict the outcomes and to direct – to colonize – the future. Brita’s positioning can be said to challenge the individualization discourse; she brings up structural constraints and connects these structures with individual desires and feelings.

Brita takes different positions with regard to what influences the decision to try for a child throughout the focus group. In the above excerpt, she talks about how increasing societal demands are having an impact on family formation, but in other parts of the interview, she determinedly refutes the idea that extrinsic circumstances are affecting her feeling of readiness. This wavering of positions is in accord with Potter and Wetherell’s (1987) suggestion that inconsistencies are common in people’s talk, and that this signifies the multiple, complex nature of the subject. In addition, Brita’s wavering positions can be seen as an example of how the focus group context *per se* and conversations in general stimulate the participants to reason, discuss and try to understand their own and others’ actions (Freeman 1993; Morgan 1997, 1998). Brita’s positioning and narration also support Giddens’ (1994) and Beck’s (1994) suggestion that knowledge is plural, uncertain and questioned; that is, certain behaviour is possible to interpret in a number of ways and truth is something dynamic and indistinct. Brita’s quote is also symptomatic of Giddens’ and Beck’s work more specifically. Brita, like the two sociologists (whom she may have read), propounds that high demands on making decisions result in feelings of stress and anxiety rather than in feelings of freedom and bliss.

### *Body matters*

Some focus group participants state that they have anticipated entering parenthood some time in life for as long as they can remember. Others say

they have been or are more uncertain about whether they will enter parenthood or not. A variety of factors are illuminated as influencing the decision to try for a child, and bodily aspects is one. How the focus group participants perceive(d) the time of pregnancy and delivery is one of the questions I ask. In some interviews (see for example FG4, FG8) the subject is raised prior to this particular question, such as in the group from which the following interview passage is drawn. The participants had talked about being hesitant about parenthood and I asked why.

Disa: Why did you hesitate? What did you think having children would be like, if you were hesitant before and didn't look forward to it and such. You must have had some perception of how.

Agneta: I was probably mostly afraid of the delivery. It was my big fear.

Vendela: Yes, a long time ago. A long time ago I felt that I probably didn't want children because I was terrified of the delivery. But later, later when this desire started to, came to dominate, then sort of 'well, it'll be alright somehow'.

Agneta: Yes exactly. They take care of you, I had to think. Yes.

Jennifer: Yes, it's the same here. I saw some movie on TV when I was young. I was probably way too young to see a delivery film but mum and dad weren't around. So I had a picture of the delivery being the worst thing you can go through, so that probably affected me. (Agneta 29, Vendela 39, Jennifer 26, parents, FG4)

Agneta, Vendela and Jennifer explain the postponement of parenthood in other ways in different parts of the interview, but in the interview passage above Agneta initiates the response to my question by bringing up her fear of the delivery. She takes the position that she was hesitant about parenthood due to this fear, and Vendela and Jennifer affirm her reasoning. Vendela adds that this fear diminished when the desire to enter parenthood started to predominate. The desire to enter parenthood thus dissipates or at least undermines other feelings, and this is a common way of arguing in the focus group data. The apprehension about pregnancy and delivery is sometimes discussed as a sign of being immature (FG2, FG4). When a person matures and feels ready for parenthood the fear becomes less overwhelming.

Bodily aspects are not commonly referred to as a strong reason for deferring parenthood, but several of the women in the data talk about

fearing the pregnancy and/or the delivery. The experience of pregnancy (and childbirth) is individual and in this respect uncertain; it is imbued with risks and the impossibility of knowing how it will affect the woman, that is, her personality, her body, and the relationship to her partner, and this is brought up in the discussions. Weight gain, hormones, morning sickness, and reduced mobility are mentioned as possible tribulations of being pregnant. But it is also stated that pregnancy is something to look forward to; the thought of delivery does not cause everybody distress. However, as Sevón (2005) and Hellmark Lindgren (2006) indicated, pregnancy and delivery are associated with risks and uncertainty. The process of deciding to try for a child is in this sense filled with ambivalence, and the excitement of being pregnant may be dampened.

Some focus group participants constantly and persistently refer to the possible negative effects of parenthood; others portray matters in a more positive light. This, however, is not consistent when it comes to bodily aspects. Sarah (30, FG1) and Amanda (31, FG3), for instance, recurrently bring up the risks and insecurities of parenthood, and come across as quite concerned about possible implications, but not when it comes to childbearing. Maja (26, parent, FG2), on the other hand, who appears to have a more pragmatic and positive outlook, says that she considered the affect of pregnancy on her weight and figure. Other participants in Maja's group confirm this concern. The discussion ends up in a reflection over other people in their surroundings, such as workmates and friends, who brought up and commented on weight and the other bodily changes that pregnancy, delivery and breastfeeding could result in. The participants object to the social attention bodily changes due to childbearing are given, and talk about their own concerns as an indication of immaturity. Tobias (30, FG9), similar to the participants in FG2, questions the norm of looking fit and slim and connects this to city life. He does so in relation to his comment that friends and acquaintances in smaller towns appear to enter parenthood younger than do those in bigger cities. Tobias, somewhat disparagingly, suggests that the desire to keep the body fit may be a reason to postpone parenthood. The ideal immanent in Tobias' positioning, as well as in much of the intrinsic conditions discourse, is that the transition to parenthood should be based on a 'pure' desire to have children, a desire that is so strong that all other concerns disappear.

So far in this chapter I have shown how the role of maturity is discussed as being connected to external circumstances, biology and to previous experiences and as something that develops rather independently of other variables. I will continue my exploration of discussions on how the feeling of readiness is engendered by turning to matters of social influence.

### ***Social influence***<sup>15</sup>

#### *The impact of friends*

In the focus group data, the engendering of maturity and readiness for parenthood is tied to social relations. Particular focus is put on the impact of friends. Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) criticized a disinterest within sociology in studying the impact friends and other social networks have on people's lives. They beseech 'a sociology of friendship', similar to Allan (1989: 2), who fifteen years before lamented the general indifference among social scientists towards "the social significance and value of friendship ties". In the field of demography and studies in reproductive decision-making, a correlation between fertility and social networks has been established (Bernardi 2003; Bongaarts and Watkins 1996; Bühler and Frątczak 2005), although the interest in social influence is rather new (Bernardi 2003: 528).

In the present focus group data, friends are often implicitly and explicitly referred to as being influential with regard to the decision about whether and when to have a child. Cleo and Jasmine (FG1) argue as follows:

Cleo: Well, I look a lot at what others do and if all my friends were to have children I would probably want children too. (...) I know I would love having a child but then I want my friends to have one as well.

Jasmine: So you don't miss out on anything. (Cleo 28, Jasmine 28, FG1)

And in another focus group, when reasons for the increased average mean age for first-time parents is discussed, the following is said:

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<sup>15</sup> The term is taken from Bernardi (2003: 535).

Brita: I also believe that things are a bit, well that's how I feel and it may not be the case for others, but if nobody else close to you has children then these thoughts may not come up because then you're in another phase of life. You talk about 'what do you study?', 'what are your plans?', and like 'where are you travelling?' and 'where do you live?' But then, if somebody starts having children and so on, then those thoughts begin to appear. So I believe it [the timing of parenthood] is a bit about whom you socialize with. I don't believe you bang your fist in the table [and do it] if nobody else has children and sort of break totally. No I think your friends, and their partners, influence you a lot.

Jill: Even though you say you wouldn't have a child just because everybody else has, I still think you are unconsciously affected, as you say. That you would probably feel pretty pressured if ten of your friends started to have children. (Brita 28, Jill 28, FG6).

The timing of parenthood is described to be contagious; the inner desire for parenthood is talked about as being interdependent on the behaviour of friends, as the two previous interview passages exemplify. The discourse on friendship seems to imply a somewhat similar life phase and lifestyle; entering parenthood 'together' is brought up as preferable. As Julia says, "We are at an age when you think about having children, about having a family. So many of your friends talk about children now in a way you never did before" (29, parent-to-be, FG9). Noah, partner to Julia, comments on friends of his who "get damn stressed when I tell them I'm going to have a child. (...) They start to ponder and think like 'you're starting to get old', 'you're starting to get to that age', sort of" (26, parent-to-be, FG9). Cleo and Jasmine (28 and 28, FG1), in the quote above and throughout the discussion, portray a mutual, timed transition to parenthood in the friendship group as security that they would not be 'left out' or 'miss out' on activities that to them epitomize life without children, such as visiting restaurants and clubs. A new phase and kind of life is accomplished together when parenthood is entered with friends. Sabina (29, FG9) explicitly uses the word security when she explains why friends have such an impact on the timing of parenthood. She argues that worries and insecurities are ventilated through a more balanced picture and that an increased feeling of security results when the transition to parenthood is reflected upon with friends.

In another study, Bernardi (2003) argued that life course transitions

are largely contagious, in particular among friends who socialize regularly. Peers, which in Bernardi's definition include "friends, colleagues, neighbors or sport mates" (2003: 536), and to which I add siblings, are sources one can learn from and discuss and identify with. The practices and values of peers are often more influential than those of parents, as "peers are assumed to face similar contingencies, as compared to previous generations", and because the "degree of similarity among close friends is generally higher, since the relationships are selected and not given, as those with kin" (2003: 536). The present focus group data support the results of Bernardi (2003) (see also Bühler and Frątczak 2005). The participants talk about parenthood as being brought up, discussed, and learnt among peers, and this is evident in all focus group interviews. Peers may become role models and provide an enticement to try for a child. They may also, however, be the contrary, that is, discouraging examples of how parenthood could turn out to be. Specifically, social interaction and networks appear to have an impact on intrinsic conditions such as feelings of maturity and readiness, with regard to positioning and subjectivities in the focus group data.

Allan suggested that: "friendship appears to be one relationship to which we attach special importance personally and culturally. Not only do our friends help to provide us with our sense of identity, but they also confirm our social worth" (1989: 1). In the present data, peers are talked about as having a greater impact on the timing of parenthood than family, but family still matters, as the following section shows.

### *Family matters*

Rose Fischer declared in 1988 that research on the transition to parenthood has neglected the significance of relatives and non-household kin, and, based on my knowledge, this statement has relevance still in relation to research conducted in the Western world. Rose Fischer wrote that "[f]amilies are studied as if they exist within household boundaries. In fact, however, the birth of a child is a family event which affects and is affected by family members who not only do share a common residence with the new parents and their child but who even may live thousand of miles away" (1988: 201, emphasis in original). Parents, that is, potential future

grandparents, could influence the timing of parenthood in different ways, depending on discourses on kin and family. Who is regarded as family? Who is regarded as having a say in the care of a child? Who is regarded as an important relation for the child? This varies on an individual, social, and cultural level, but common, mutual ways of arguing are presumably found within a certain cultural context.

Family does matter for the timing of parenthood, as it is portrayed in the focus group data. Ella (33, FG3), for instance, stresses the impact of her parents. They had their first child in their mid-20s, when both had completed a post-upper secondary school degree, and thus, getting a degree in higher education and not rushing into parenthood were values that impacted on Ella, as she sees it (see also Eva, 38, parent FG8, Ursula, 25, FG5). Ella understands her postponement of parenthood as being influenced by her parents' life biographies and opinions. Lisa (32, FG6) argues in a similar way when she says that her parents encouraged her to "do everything you want [first], so that you feel that you know who you are and what you want and so on, so that you can focus properly on family life later". Lisa and Ella position themselves as having been influenced by their parents' attitudes.

Parents and parents-in-law are also talked about as people who try to have an impact on their offspring's reproductive decision-making, for instance by recurrently bringing up their desire for grandchildren. However, parental impact may not be explicit. Parents may influence the decision to try for a child 'only' by 'being there' as potential, future grandparents. The notion that parents and/or parents-in-law expect and desire grandchildren is enough to create a certain amount of social pressure. Cleo (28, FG1) says she feels sorry for her parents, and that "All their friends and acquaintances have plenty of grandchildren but my parents don't have any, 'but we've got the cats', she says". In addition, the future grandparents' age is reflected over when the timing of parenthood is discussed. Grandparents who are too old may not be able to help out and socialize with the grandchildren in the anticipated way. That is, one possible consequence of postponing parenthood is that the grandparents are older than what is regarded to be the ideal.

Bernardi (2003) suggested that parents may have a rather great impact on their children's reproductive decision-making due to emotional bonds and the help and support they may be able to offer. Like others, such

as Townsend (1997), Bernardi stated that parents “have acknowledged claims on grandchildren” (2003: 537) and that this puts them in the position of having a say. If and when to have a child is thus not solely a private matter. Individuals other than the couple (or person) may affect decisions regarding reproductive behaviour, and may claim responsibilities and rights over (future) children. It is thus relevant to detect such actors and analyse their importance (Townsend 1997). The present data support those who argue that social relations, friends and family, affect fertility. The discourses on friendship and kin make it clear that friends and (future) grandparents matter.

## **Discussion**

### *A settled life and a settled self*

When is the time right to enter parenthood? This is the question in focus in this chapter, and in much research on reproductive decision-making. Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995), for instance, suggested that attained education, stable income and partner, and preferable housing are elementary preconditions for people to feel ready for parenthood. In the focus group interviews conducted for the present study, issues such as education, a permanent job, and career are brought up as influencing the timing of parenthood, but they do not in any way predominate discussions on the requirements for entering parenthood. There may be a variety of reasons for the secondary position that work, education and income are given. One may be that those aspects are taken-for-granted requirements for parenthood, included in the standard adulthood/parenthood model that continues to influence young adults in the Western world (Lee 2001). Another reason may be that there is a strong norm to refute a connection between reproductive decision-making/children and money. The child should not be valued (or devalued) for financial reasons but for emotional ones – ‘the priceless child should not be priced’ (Zelizer 1985), and thus financial issues are repressed. It could also be the case that education, work/career and private finances appear secondary to finding a partner and to having done other things because of the Swedish political-economic context in which the focus group participants live.

Since the late 1960s, Swedish politics have promoted the combination of work and parenthood for women as well as men, for instance with paid parental leave, subsidized and available childcare, and a general child allowance. Besides this, the social security system is relatively advanced. It provides unemployment insurance, sick leave insurance, and housing allowances; in this respect, the government offers its citizens relative financial security. Many focus group participants mention a stable income as an important criterion for trying for a child. A stable income in Sweden, however, is not exclusively permanent employment. For the person who has worked a year and is entitled to unemployment insurance and full paid parental leave these two sources of income may be regarded to generate at least a relative income security, and the focus group discussions indicate that they are seen as such. The potential scenario of entering parenthood in less ideal circumstances, such as while studying and/or when one has an insecure income, is not talked about with concern and worry, but is rather pictured as a situation that could be handled well, if necessary with governmental support and/or assistance from the family.

The focus group interviews provide excellent examples of how people in an interview context, in interaction and conversation with others, try to understand themselves and others. Varieties of explanatory models surface in the discussions and are available for the participants to use in positioning and portraying themselves. First of all, it is important to state that the decision to start a family depends on individual preferences and experiences, and these, it goes without saying, vary. The striking general conclusion, however, is that many criteria need to be met in order to develop a feeling of readiness. The desire to fulfil the “classic markers of adulthood” (Blatterer 2005: 7), that is, living a settled life in terms of a romantic partner, work and residence, is prominent. A settled life is depicted as providing the best circumstances possible for parenthood and a sound childhood, and this is in accord with how Swedish young adults reasoned in another, similar study (Brannen, Kugelberg, Das Does Guerreiro and Smithson 2002). However, a more complex picture emerged when the present data were analysed. The definition of a settled life is not as clear-cut as it may appear; the focus group discussions illuminate variations and varying positioning. Having a permanent job, a stable relationship and good accommodation, that is, being ready and secure, is

indeed emphasized as the ideal, but other scenarios are also feasible, and material requirements for parenthood may change or peter out due to aspects such as increasing age, the risk of infertility, and/or a strong inner desire to try for a child.

The data indicate that the classic markers of adulthood do not necessarily give rise to feelings of maturity and readiness for parenthood. A person has to feel mature enough for parenthood, and this maturity is portrayed as being contingent on biological factors, social relations, and having 'lived life first'. The general reasoning in the focus groups is that parenthood should not be pushed – the position of not feeling ready for parenthood appears to be an “untroubled” one (Wetherell 1998: 390), even when preconditions such as a stable partner, accommodation and income have been fulfilled. This result complements Bernhardt's (2000a, 2000b) study. For those over 30 years old, the most common answer to why they had not yet entered parenthood was that they wanted to have done other things first and that they did not yet desire to have children. There are indications in the focus group data that feelings of immaturity could continue. This does not necessarily mean that a person chooses never to have children; parenthood is still, as was shown in the previous chapter, a taken-for-granted step for most. But the transition may be more infused with insecurity and unease for those who lack the confidence that a powerful desire for a child presumably entails.

### *Age and body*

Age in particular is described as affecting the timing of parenthood. The participants talk about getting up in age, getting older, and say that the clock is ticking. Additionally, the feeling of maturity is talked about as being biologically triggered and connected to age. The biology discourse contains the risk of infertility and problems with conceiving, which to some extent are connected to age. Some of the parents in the focus groups refer to themselves as having embraced the risk of fecundity problems before the child was conceived, and of having tried for a child with the presumption that it may take a couple of years to conceive. These participants talked about getting pregnant sooner than expected. Others portray themselves as having been too certain about conceiving. The conception took some time,

after they finally decided to embark on parenthood.

Regarding the focus group discussions, being ready for parenthood means, for a woman, feeling ready for pregnancy and delivery and the possible ordeals that these aspects of parenthood may entail. Many women in the focus groups bring up concerns about the bodily implications of childbearing, as in Hellmark Lindgren's (2006) study on individual experiences and cultural notions of childbearing. In Hellmark Lindgren's work, pregnancy is connected to joy and anticipation as well as to risks and anxiety. The pregnant body is very much connected to risk and the avoidance of risk in the Western world, as, for instance, Oakley (1981, 1993) and Martin (1987) have pointed out (see also Gatrell 2005).

Sevón (2005: 462) argued that one issue neglected in reproductive research is women's experiences of being pregnant, of the delivery and of becoming mothers. I tend to agree with her. Notions of the body and how these may affect men and women's reproductive decision-making require further investigation. How do men and women regard bodily aspects in their decision about whether and when to have a child? How do they perceive the bodily changes associated with pregnancy and childbirth? Gatrell (2005) showed that many women experience long-term physical and mental problems after pregnancy and delivery, problems that affect their life and intimate relationship. It seems reasonable to presume that these kinds of negative experiences have an impact on the number of children a woman desires to have. There is also reason to believe that such experiences are spread in social circles (more or less, and depending on the cultural and social context) and could influence other women's and men's ideas about what parenthood could entail and about whether or not a transition is desirable. And this takes us to the impact of social influence.

### *Social relations and kin*

Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) argued that friendship networks are important sources of intimacy, love and care for contemporary Western people, and as did Giddens (1992). According to Giddens, the nuclear family, kin and friends are all important in providing a person with emotional and material support, and common to all close relations is that they are based on trust and reciprocity. This means that a person maintains

a relationship to kin, friends and a romantic partner when s/he feels that the relationship continues to engender intimacy and emotional support. Giddens (1992) called this the 'pure relationship'. Friends and acquaintances are, as Roseneil and Budgeon (2004) stressed, significant relationships and sources of support in people's everyday lives. The focus group data support this, and the results of the analysis suggest that friends and social networks do have an impact on individuals' reproductive decision-making.

There are indications that focus group participants fear the implications parenthood could have for friendship relations and/or that a sense of security is gained from the notion that one is sustaining or entering the same life phase one's friends are in. That is, the reciprocity and sharing of experiences, ideals and ideas may decrease between friends if one enters parenthood and the other does not, but it may maintain and strengthen if parenthood is entered 'together'. Thus, friendship matters for positioning towards the timing of parenthood, and family is considered to have some impact as well. Siblings may give vicarious experiences of being a parent and potential grandparents may bring up their longing for grandchildren, which they to some extent are supposed to do. Grandparents are referred to as being primary kin to the (future) child and as potential resources for support and help in minding the child.

## 6

### **Having a child together: love and family**

Previous research has shown that young Swedish adults put great emphasis on having a stable and good relationship and on having found the right partner for family formation before trying for a child (Bernhardt 2000a; Engwall 2005; Fagerberg 2000; Kugelberg 2000; Statistics Sweden 2001a). But how does this accord with Bauman's suggestion that "[i]n a liquid modern setting of life, relationships are perhaps the most common, acute, deeply felt and troublesome incarnations of ambivalence" (Bauman 2003: viii)? Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) argued that finding romantic love is central to people's lives. Engwall's (2005) study is one example of this, and Berlant and Warner (2000) proposed that life in the Western world is largely organized around coupling and the prevailing nuclear family ideal. But parallel with this ideal hover the notions of "liquid love" (Bauman 2003) and the "pure relationship" (Giddens 1992). The idea that a romantic relationship should be based on sexual and emotional reciprocity has increased individual reflection and insecurity over one's own relationship and its lasting potential; the risk of relationship dissolution permeates every intimate relationship, according to Giddens (1992) and Bauman (2003). The romantic relationship is also imbued with ambivalence owing to the strong norm that men and women should 'have a life of one's own' (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). The individualization discourse, as I call it, includes the notion of the independent, self-fulfilling individual. The romantic love discourse, on the other hand, contains elements of individual renunciations. This creates dilemmas in people's everyday love relationships (Bauman 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

The previous two chapters have explored notions of the ideal life course and the timing of parenthood, but without discussing romantic relationships and notions of family. These latter aspects of the timing of parenthood are essential to explicate in a separate chapter, as the focus

group reasoning about family formation and life course is imbued with ideas and ideals about family and the romantic relationship. This chapter is centred on how family and the romantic relationship are discussed in relation to parenthood. It explores the emphasis put on finding the right partner and embarking on parenthood when one is in the right relationship, the notion of the child as a mutual project and discussions on what mutual implies, and the risk of relationship dissolution that is evidently raised in the discussions. The chapter illuminates and discusses the nuclear family discourse, the discourse on (romantic) love, and images of fatherhood and motherhood.

## **The child as a mutual project**

### ***Finding the right partner***

The nuclear family ideal predominates the focus group positioning toward the nuclear family discourse. That is, entering parenthood and raising a child in a nuclear family and with a forever-lasting partner is referred to as a significant ingredient in the ideal life and family formation. The romantic love discourse correlates with the nuclear family ideal: the good, adult life should entail living with a partner in a loving, reciprocal relationship. This becomes of particular importance when the decision to try for a child is discussed, and the most common positioning is to state that finding the right partner to enter parenthood together with is essential before considering having a child, as is shown in Bernhardt's (2000a, 2000b) study.

As the present focus group data indicate, finding the right partner for parenthood may be difficult and it may take time. Lisa, for instance, refers to this experience when justifying why she has not yet had a child.

Disa: Is it difficult to find someone who things feel right with? You mentioned that [referring to Lisa].

Lisa: Yes, for me it's been a bit of a problem, when it comes to having children. Because the ones you've met, it has been great fun and fun people to be with, you've done lots together, you've been travelling, you've had lots of interests in common and so on, but then there's

always something else you consider when you think about starting a family. It's another step, sort of. It's not a really good friend only but there's something else as well (...).

Disa: Something else, you said. There has to be something else. Do you know what that is? (...)

Lisa: Like partly they have to have a good attitude towards children.

Disa: Mm, that they want [children] and the like?

Lisa: Partly that they want children but also the general attitude towards children. I was dating a guy who had a bad, bad attitude towards children in general

Disa: How do you mean?

Lisa: Like that children were generally trying. And a person who thinks children are generally trying that, that person isn't the right person to have a child with. (Lisa 33, FG6)

The notion that it may be hard to find the right partner is commonly expressed in the focus groups. A variety of explanations are given for why this may be the case. Lisa's quotation exemplifies one way of reasoning. Lisa stresses that the partner's attitude toward children is an essential factor that determines whether a partner is a potential person to have a child with; entry into parenthood must be looked upon in a positive manner. She argues that entering parenthood with someone requires a special sort of relationship. Similar ways of arguing appear in the data, but other aspects are also raised as explanations of why finding the right partner is difficult, such as having a busy leisure time, an active life, and high demands on the romantic relationship. The notion of independence and individual freedom (Lee 2005) conflicts with the romantic love ideal, where commitment to another person and her/his wishes is central (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). Ursula's argumentation is a succinct example of this. Ursula positions herself in the affirmative of the individualization discourse.

Ursula: It can be hard to find that [the right partner], because you want to be free although you're dating. You still want your own freedom, in some way. That's probably the hardest, finding someone who thinks like you do on the matter. (25, FG5)

Ursula stresses the importance of freedom, although being in a relationship, "you want to be free although you're dating", she says. That this freedom may be difficult to achieve is signified by her argument that "someone who thinks like you do on the matter" could be hard to find.

Ursula elaborates her reasoning on freedom further on in the interview, and some of the other participants become engaged in the discussion.

Ursula: I believe that when you find this right partner then, then you feel free when you are with this person, sort of. But it's important that you have fun independently of one another, right. Extremely important that you stay in contact with your old friends and that you still socialize with them and go out and have fun and perhaps party or just for a movie, or other stuff, and that you don't feel too tied down. I don't think I want to feel too attached to another person. But I am attached to him, if you put it that way. But I don't want to feel restricted.

Mona: Like mum, living her life through dad. She doesn't have her own life. I wouldn't like to have it that way.

Ursula: It's not even on the agenda.

Joel: The problem is that when you really, really fall in love, then you only want to be with that person, all the time, and to adjust and to live in symbiosis. I think it's almost like a disease, when you are like this really, really in love, that it's not really healthy, to be honest, perhaps not what you should strive for. Then you don't get your freedom and then you get hurt and then it becomes a problem in the relationship if one partner is like this really, really in love. I think more perhaps you should be friends, mates perhaps, you may function better together. (Ursula 25, Mona 24, Joel 26, FG5)

There is an obvious dilemma in being in a relationship based on love and continuing to be free. Ursula says: "I don't think I want to feel too attached to another person. But I am attached to him, if you put it that way. But I don't want to feel restricted". There is a "drive for freedom" (Bauman 2003: 34) evident in Ursula's account, which is supported by the other participants. Mona refers to her mother's dependence on her husband: "she doesn't have her own life", Mona says, rejecting this way of living.

The prominence of independence and of women's equal claim to this is exemplified in Ursula's and Mona's positioning. The gender equality ideal underlies this reasoning. Joel positions himself in the affirmative of the romantic discourse and illustrates the dilemma this causes in relation to the individualization discourse. When you are in love you want to be with that and perhaps only that person, Joel argues, but this is described as problematic for the individual and the relationship. Romantic love connotes dependence, and dependence should be avoided. The above interview

passage is an example of how being ‘too’ attached to another individual is described negatively: It is vital to be ‘free’ in terms of having one’s own life independently of one’s partner.

Most participants in the focus group discussions refer to ‘finding the right partner’ as a prerequisite for entering parenthood, but the emphasis on this is also questioned. Alice (33, FG5), for instance, implies that having a child could be of greater importance than whom one is with. That is, she would not consider abortion were she to get pregnant without being in a stable relationship, she says. Alice refers to her age and to the years ticking by when justifying her position. She does not, however, assert that it would be appropriate to actively try for a child without a suitable, long-term partner.

### ***Motherhood, fatherhood and mutual responsibilities***

A predominating argumentation in the focus groups is that having a child should be based on a mutual decision and commitment. Parenthood – the child – is talked about as a mutual project; responsibilities, obligations and rights are shared, and this appears to be a common understanding in Sweden, as seen in previous studies (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Chronholm 2004; Forsberg 2007a; Hagström 1999; Johansson and Klinth 2007; Kugelberg 1999). The general positioning in the focus group data is that the mother and father have equal obligations and rights as concerns caring and financially providing for the child, regardless of whether the child was planned or not. This argumentation is in line with the gender equality discourse and political projects to create dual-earner, dual-carer families.

One important component of gender equality politics has been the ‘new father’ image, that is, the promotion of the father’s importance for favourable child development (Bekkengen 2002; Bergman and Hobson 2002; Klinth 2002; Phoenix and Woollett 1991). Joel (26, FG5), however, represents a diverging position. A child is the father’s responsibility only on the condition that he was involved in the decision to enter parenthood, Joel argues. The following interview passage contains a dialogue between Joel and Alice on the matter. It stems out of Joel stating that he has no time for a child at the present. Alice comments on this:

Alice: But if you'd found out that you were going to be a dad, would you.

Joel: Then I would. How do you find that out, by the way?

Alice: Well, if any of your sporadic dates that you mentioned before

Joel: yes. Then they come to me and they say 'Joel I've been thinking about having a child'. 'Yes, but please do', I'd say,' but unfortunately I won't have time for your child so I'd recommend that you don't'.

Alice: But do you think you'd be all right with doing that?

Joel: Yes, I'm totally convinced.

Alice: That you would put aside the fact that you are the father of a child.

Joel: It depends totally on who the mother is.

Alice: So it's not about the child, it's about the mother?

Joel: Yes.

(Alice 33, Joel 26, FG5).

Alice questions Joel's positioning. In her view, the child becomes a mutual project at the moment of conception. This may not be explicit in the above passage, but it is in other parts of the interview. Alice's positioning on the matter is consistent throughout the interview, as is Joel's. Joel connects involved fatherhood with romantic love and a nuclear family arrangement; his relationship to the mother determines his relation to the child, as the above quote elucidates. Joel consistently opposes the new father image in the focus group interview and proposes traditional fatherhood and manhood, where the woman is portrayed as the primary caregiver and the man as the absent parent who protects and financially provides for his wife and children. In the data overall, Joel is alone in affirming this position. The other men and women endorse gender equality and the dual-earner, dual-carer ideal, but Joel's positioning still appears to be rather untroubled (Wetherell 1998). Alice and the other women in the group challenge his positioning, but the co-participants also pick up and affirm parts of his reasoning. That is, Joel is not outspokenly questioned; the traditional father image is available to identify with.

It is reasonable to suggest that Joel's status as a man enables his positioning. Men continue to have the possibility to opt out of parenthood in a way that women cannot – (normal) manhood is primarily connected to paid labour, while womanhood is connected to providing care and being self-sacrificing (Bekkengen 2002; Finch 2006; Haas and Hwang 2007; Hays 1996; Hobson and Morgan 2002; Phoenix and Woollett 1991;

Stoppard 2000). It is thus not an option for Alice, as a woman, to stress that parental responsibility is an option based on her relationship to the father; it is neither a possible nor an attractive position for her. Alice's positioning in relation to the timing of parenthood is in accordance with her affirmation of the dual-carer ideal. She talks about herself as longing for a child but of getting older. She has a partner of six months and she states that she would keep an unplanned child despite the unstableness of her relationship. Alice's endorsement of the child as a mutual project alludes to the picture of a father who would take on his share of the caring regardless of whether he was her partner or not.

Positioning towards the mutual varies between individuals, as do images of what being a father and being a mother could imply. This becomes particularly evident in the focus group that Alice and Joel are in (FG5). This may be an effect of the group constellation. Focus group 5 contains a comparatively large number of participants: four men and three women; they are all childless, some are singles and some have partners. They attend the same vocational college and class and know one another rather well. They appear comfortable with, and possibly used to, expressing and debating differing opinions. The discussions on mutual responsibilities and images of motherhood and fatherhood were particularly lively in this group, but what they said also mirrors lines of argument found in the data overall, although not as debated. One risk that was recurrently referred to, as a risk, was the risk of the father not being able to practice good, involved fatherhood. The notion of motherhood and fatherhood as entailing equal responsibilities and rights in relation to the child may be difficult to practice, the participants suggest.

### *The new father: superfluous or salient?*

In the focus group data in general, women are talked about as having a biological disposition to bond with the child through pregnancy and breastfeeding that the father lacks. This is repeatedly referred to as a matter of fact by men as well as women. This matter of fact, however, is pointed out as something that causes problems for men in practicing fatherhood. The father may not be interchangeable with the mother, at least not initially, owing to the strong bond between mother and child that biological

factors are thought to engender. This turns into a problem because fatherhood and good fatherhood are defined on the basis of the father-child relationship, a definition that most of the participants employ and that corresponds with the notion of the new father.

For some participants, the image of the new father is problematic in itself, and they refer to and position themselves in the affirmative regarding a traditional breadwinner model in which the man is distanced from the child and defined by his practices in relation to the family as a unit. Joel (26, FG5) is the participant who most strongly and most consistently advocates this position. Practicing traditional fatherhood and manhood, however, is not easy in a context where the involved father and gender equality ideals are the predominating images. The notion that men and women are naturally different includes the idea that the sexes acquire specific qualities, and while mothers have such qualities because they carry, deliver, and breastfeed the child, the irreplaceable qualities of men are becoming harder to discern; there is not much a man can do that a woman cannot, and Joel raises this as troublesome. He argues as follows:

Joel: I think the reason so many families dissolve is maybe that the man doesn't feel needed after the first child arrives. That you need a purpose, to have something to do that makes you feel needed. In the past you had that. Defending the family, perhaps not that relevant today, but you're not acknowledged because you go to work. The money is in the bank account, the wife sort of never sees how you work and strive, but she only sees when you vacuum and turn on the dishwasher and unload it. (26, FG5)

The modern, new man does not acquire attributes that distinguish him from a woman and, according to Joel, this is not an attractive image. Vacuum cleaning and turning on dishwashers are not accomplishments that count when manhood is to be defined, and a man risks feeling unneeded as a father and as a man. Joel is attracted by the image of the mother as the primary provider of care for the child, but on the condition that the father has his own manly duties that make him indispensable. Throughout the interview, Joel stresses that the mother is essential to the child. She is the person the child wants and needs. She is the one who supplies warmth and food. The child instinctively recognizes her by the sense of smell. Joel argues that letting the father be the main carer could cause psychological

damage to the child. Thus, he clearly affirms the notion of biological difference between men and women.

Joel's definition of good fatherhood diverts from the general, common way of reasoning. The other men in the group agree with him about the problem that contemporary fathers may feel unneeded, but they stress the importance of being an actively engaged father with equal rights and responsibilities to care for the child. This, however, as I have just stated, does not mean that the men do not face the same problem. All of them talk about the risk of feeling unneeded and left out as a father. While the mother is described as indispensable because she provides the child with milk, the man is pictured as having no task that makes his presence imperative in regard to the child. The women in this particular interview (FG5) argue that cleaning and washing are significant chores to help out with. The men, however, consistently reject these kinds of duties as something that could define them as valuable fathers. The women's attempt to rectify contemporary fatherhood by connecting it to household chores is not successful, and this is hardly surprising. Manhood is not associated with the domestic sphere, and while the notion of the new father connects the man with the child, notions of manhood and masculinity appear to dissociate him from household chores (Bekkengen 2002; Haas and Hwang 2007; Mellström 2007; Wall and Arnold 2007).

In addition to manhood not being connected with the domestic sphere, notions of femininity and the "breastfeeding discourse" (Wall 2001) appear to attach women to the domestic sphere and children, both in the focus group positioning and in practice, as previous studies have indicated (Bekkengen 2002; Hays 1996; Kugelberg 1999; Stoppard 2000; Wall 2001; Wall and Arnold 2007). Dan (36, parent, FG8), a first-time parent of a 20-months-old child, brings this up as an experience of parenthood. He talks about him and his partner having had the ambition to share the responsibilities and burdens of parenthood equally, but this became difficult, if not impossible, to accomplish. Pregnancy, delivery and breastfeeding served to bond his partner, the mother, to the child and to make her not only primarily responsible for the child but also more restricted by it, Dan argues.

*The new mother: another-mother and a mother-mother*

Women in Sweden have entered the paid labour force in great numbers from the 1960s onwards, and most women of today continue work after becoming mothers. The women in the focus groups refer to themselves as family providers and talk about their income as an essential part of the household economy – they, as Kugelberg (1999) called it, have a strong work identity. But they also, like Kugelberg’s informants, affirm a strong ‘mother identity’ by their positioning. Many of the women in the focus groups draw on the discourse on difference and picture women as having a predisposition to care for others, and thus a natural inclination to long for motherhood. But although the notion that women are naturally close to the child and predisposed to care is recurrent, a parallel idea is that women may find it difficult to identify with motherhood. Many women in the focus group interviews state that they are not or have not been particularly interested in or fond of children. Thus, the idea of the woman as naturally caring and loving towards children is not something women identify with unquestionably. Quite the contrary, a common subject position is to describe oneself as being a woman with little knowledge of and interest in children (at least until deciding to have a child of one’s own). This position passes without being challenged, which indicates that another sort of motherhood and womanhood is socially accepted. It is womanhood in which women are not naturally prone to care and not willing to sacrifice work and other activities for motherhood – a womanhood that has been politically promoted since the 1960s. Thus, when women imagine motherhood, it is common to picture oneself as disinterested in children, and to, I suggest, appropriate a position traditionally associated with men and manhood. For a man and a woman, a couple, it may be a mutual ‘project’ not to be interested in children as well as to be interested in children before entering parenthood; both positions are available to both genders. But the more traditional notion of women and mothers being predisposed to care also impacts greatly on the focus group participants, with ambivalence and tension as a result.

## The nuclear family ideal<sup>16</sup>

Following the participants' narration, looking at how they understand themselves and their actions, shows a recurring affirmative positioning of the nuclear family. Postponed parenthood and the timing of parenthood are described as being contingent on the romantic relationship. The right partner has to be found, and time and cohabiting make certain that he or she is the one. Dan, a 36 year-old first-time parent, puts it the following way:

Dan: I had the view that life was going to look a certain way [when entering parenthood] but of greatest importance was trust in the relationship. (...) I know that it's going to be the two of us until we die, that's my true conviction, but had I doubted that then it hadn't been anything, no child. (36, parent, FG8)

For Dan, as for the majority of the focus group participants when following their positioning, parenthood and a sound childhood are linked to a nuclear family arrangement. It is a recurrent narrative pattern in the focus groups to refer to bad experiences of growing up in a broken home to justify (to others and oneself) why living and raising a child in a nuclear family is of such importance. The ideal is a life-long romantic commitment to the second parent of one's child. The possibility, however, of living this ideal is uncertain. Romantic love may come and go, and thus there is always the risk that the relationship will dissolve. The following interview extract with Sarah, Jasmine and Cleo illustrates the dilemma the discourse of love creates.

Sarah: That's one important reason for me not to have a child until you know for sure that this is a good guy and this is a guy I want to live the rest of my life with. Then you never know but.

Jasmine: You can't ever be sure of that, really.

Sarah: No, you can't be sure but you are a lot surer if you've been with someone five or six years then if you've been with someone half a year, because then you don't know this person. I mean, someone who chooses to have a child after half a year, I don't know if they think that much.

Cleo: They probably think that it's going to last. I really hope they do, that they don't start the relationship on the condition that it doesn't

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<sup>16</sup> The remaining part of the chapter is mainly from Bergnéhr (2006: paragraph 15-35).

matter if it ends. (Sarah 30, Jasmine 28, Cleo 28, FG1)

There are many things said in this quotation that signify common ways of arguing and recurrent orientations of positioning. Sarah, for example, stresses how important it is for her to be sure that she will live the rest of her life with the man she is having a child with. Sarah, like Dan, grew up with divorced parents. In the interview, she repeatedly mentions her strategy of how to prevent relationship dissolution, which is to extend the period of cohabiting before parenthood. But, as she also states and Jasmine confirms, there is no way to be absolutely sure that a relationship will last. The romantic relationship and a nuclear family constellation are in this way utterly uncertain.

The nuclear family is the dominating ideal, when how to live life and what is best for the child are talked about in the focus groups. Some participants, however, position themselves in alternative ways. Harry, a first-time parent (31, FG2), is one of those. He expresses his view on the nuclear family with ambivalence. With regard to one of his statements, he anticipated entering parenthood at some stage in life but never imagined himself living the nuclear family. In other parts of the interview, however, he states that it was important to him to test the relationship before deciding it was time to try for a child. Harry's reasoning is one example of the predominant notion that a child is to be had in a relationship. It is also an indication that the nuclear family is not necessarily connected to positive attributes. Max is a participant who determinedly confirms this. He is the only one who rejects the nuclear family as the ideal arrangement for raising a child in, and who presents an alternative, namely to have a child with a friend instead of a partner. But all the same, as the excerpt below shows, the nuclear family ideal is prominent also when Max talks.

Max: Well, in a way that's how you have been raised, how it should be. And it's probably really good for the children if the parents stay together forever because it's hard when they divorce. If they stay together all their lives and they're happy together. I think it's probably really tough if the parents stick together only because they have children. It's probably harder. Because for me it was hard when my parents got divorced but after a while I realized that it was much nicer when they were separated. I have a hard time believing that it [a relationship] will last. Everybody separates and if they don't they live in totally sick marriages [laughter]. There may be some, there are

some few who appear to be fine but many of them, my friends' parents who are still married, have quite unpleasant marriages where one decides everything and one sort of always steps aside. Well, I believe the risk that you divorce is great. (...) Well, you can try and I will try, obviously I will, but it feels like the statistics only indicate that it won't last. Why would my marriage in particular last? (...) Well, I also thought, like I thought in the past that perhaps it'd be better to have children with a friend. And both had their families. Because I don't think it's bad for the child to grow up in two different families, no I only think that's good, to get lots of different impressions but never any distressing arguments between mum and dad. (26, FG7)

Max portrays himself as having little faith in the lasting potential of romantic relationships. This position makes it hard for him to stress that the best for the child is to grow up in a family consisting of both original parents. But Max is very aware of the prevalence of this ideal. His positioning indicates that the nuclear family arrangement is so taken for granted that it is almost impossible to reject totally. Max refers to the nuclear family in the affirmative when he says: "it's probably really good for the children if the parents stay together forever". It is, however, only good on the condition that the relationship is "healthy", "good" and characterized by equity, and there is little chance of any relationship to live up to these criteria in the long run, according to Max. Thus, relationships dissolve and should dissolve, since it is not in the best interest of the child or the parents to stay in a relationship that is not good. Max refers to his own experiences and legitimates his positioning and disbelief in the nuclear family by doing so. In the context of the interview and mediated through his narration, Max, as Freeman (1993) would say, connects the past with the present and the future, in order to logically depict and understand himself.

### ***Risking separation***

The notion of risking relationship dissolution when entering parenthood permeates the focus group discussions, and is connected to discourses on romantic love, on family and on the good childhood. The participants talk about separation as the natural solution, should any of the partners be dissatisfied with the relationship. They bring up experiences, observations

and statistical data to show the occurrence of relationship dissolution, and they produce a picture of parenthood as particularly straining on romantic relationships. Postponed parenthood and the increased mean age of first-time parents are often explained similar to how Amanda and Ella describe it:

Amanda: Then I also believe that with our generation which has experienced divorce that you like to wait with having children until you're quite sure.

Ella: Ask me, I know. My parents are divorced.

Amanda: Yes of course. That's the norm if anything.

Ella: Yes. Yes, because I believe that matters, in my case. That you sort of, yes, wait. You should rather be 100 percent sure, even though obviously you can't be, but still, sort of. If you get my thinking.

Amanda: Yes absolutely. You want to be quite sure anyway. (Amanda 31 and Ella 33, FG3)

When Amanda and Ella talk about the reasons for deferring parenthood they understand their own postponement by referring to the experience of growing up in broken homes. They wish to avoid this scenario and want to be as sure as possible that the partner is right and the relationship is good. A bit further on in the discussion Amanda elaborates on why her experience of divorce influences her decision about when to have a child.

Amanda: I want to know that Hubert and I can deal with conflicts in a good way that won't affect the child. And I want to sort of know that I know him. I don't want any personal traits to pop up that I don't know, recognize or can't handle when I sit with a little baby that screams. That wouldn't work. You want to get things sorted out first. (31, FG3)

Amanda emphasizes the relationship to her partner when talking about her postponement of parenthood. She reflects upon her relationship and upon the importance she puts on knowing herself and her partner and their interactive patterns. "I don't want any personal traits to pop up that I don't know, recognize or can't handle when I sit with a little baby that screams", she states. Parenthood, as she pictures it, is potentially straining, but eased if the couple is united in the endeavour. Later on she says:

Amanda: It's also a fear of how it's going to be. My new traits and his new traits that are the result of this [having a child]. Is it going to work? How do we make it work? Will we continue to have fun together or will it be a constant struggle with time and energy? And feelings of insufficiency, right. It will, it will change so much. There are so many who separate the first year. That's how it is. You know what you've got but not what you'll get. (31, FG3)

Generally in the focus group data to live and to experience life as a couple over an extensive period of time before parenthood is commonly referred to as the strategy to prevent relationship dissolution. Amanda's accounts signify a prominent dilemma in regard to this. She talks about wanting to know all her partner's sides before entering parenthood to try to avoid unpredicted scenarios, but in other parts of the interview she states that parenthood will change life, her and her partner. The question is: How? Will the relationship endure? In line with the positioning of other focus group participants Amanda succinctly states: "You know what you've got but not what you'll get".

Amanda and Sarah (30, FG1) are two individuals in two different interviews that explicitly relate the risk of separation to the risk of lone motherhood. Like other participants they connect lone motherhood with hardship. To be a lone mother, as it is most commonly depicted, is to be constantly short of time, energy and money. When Sarah and Amanda talk about how to avoid lone motherhood, they refer to the strategy of "getting to know the partner properly" before entering parenthood. But there are others who act, as I see it, more pragmatically towards uncertainty and the potential scenario of separation. Maja (26, parent, FG2) is one example. According to her, to gain a good education and a stable income has been a way to make certain that she would manage by herself in case she became a lone mother. Maja takes a 'pragmatic' position; she presents a somewhat practical solution to a potential problem. 'Pragmatic participants' in the focus group data tend to do this. They appear less worried about the outcomes of parenthood. The strategy of Sarah and Amanda, on the other hand, does not appear to decrease anxieties about the possible outcomes of parenthood.

## ***Responsible parenthood***

To have a child is portrayed as a great responsibility in the focus group data. What is best for the child should always be uppermost. The nuclear family model and dual-earner dual-carer parenthood saturate notions of what is best for a child. The dominating notion is that it is best for a child to grow up with two physically and emotionally engaged parents. Jonathan's positioning throughout the interview exemplifies this. For Jonathan, the most essential aspect of responsible parenthood is to give the child daily access to both mother and father. He, as many other participants, refers to his own childhood to legitimate his position.

Jonathan: My parents separated when I was four years old, right. Exactly when you need your father the most, and mum moved five hundred kilometres away, sort of. That's not good for the child, really. This is how it is: if you have a child then you're responsible for them. And I'm convinced, there is no-one who could persuade me to think differently, it's not politically correct but it's my opinion that a child needs a mother and a father. That is, a woman and a man to look up to, as role models to look up to and learn from. And therefore I don't believe in [raising] children in homosexual relationships. No I don't believe in that. I think things will go wrong. Like, it's possible, it's possible to solve in other ways, like with other role models besides the couple so to say. But it's more like, I think that if you have a child you shouldn't have it for your own sake. [You're] responsible for the child. Therefore my demands are very high before I have a child with anybody. Then it has to work (29, FG5).

Jonathan refers to his own experiences of growing up with an absent father. His positioning is affirmative of the notion of the involved (new) father and the father's importance to the child's development (Phoenix and Woollett 1991). A child needs both a mother and a father, Jonathan stresses and he dismisses the idea of raising children in homosexual families, a debate that was current at the time of the focus group interview. Later on in the interview Jonathan stresses his opinion again. He argues that careful reflection is required of any couple before they start trying for a child. Has the relationship a good chance of survival? Will it endure the strains of pregnancy and parenthood? Responsible parenthood requires attentive consideration of this point. Thus, as a parent or potential parent a person is responsible for the child's well being.

Finding the right partner as a strategic endeavour to decrease the risk of separation is an integral part of this responsibility.

There are participants who argue that parenthood results in increased responsibilities towards one another and the relationship. Brita (28, FG6) is the one who does so most explicitly. According to Brita, parents should try hard to make the relationship work if there are problems. This is regarded as best for the child. However, Brita (as well as the other focus group participants) is very much influenced by the discourse on love, that is, notions of what should characterize a good romantic relationship. Brita's quote below illustrates how the discourse on love and the discourse on the good childhood may become contradictory.

Brita: I also believe that the relationship enters another dimension [when becoming parents]. I don't mean that it becomes dull because you are mum and dad but I think you look upon your responsibilities towards one another in another way. Well, that's how I see it. I don't just see 'well I'm not that much in love with this guy anymore and I don't know if this relationship's going to work', but the relationship enters another level when you've started a family. I don't say that you should live together if you're not in love but in some way you get another relation to this person that you have to cherish, in some way. Like today, it's only him and me and then it's only one person getting hurt if it doesn't work, and that's the one who wants it to work, but then [after having a child] there are others. It's another commitment to the relationship. I don't mean that you have to live together, but in some way I think that you can see it like this as well (28, FG6).

A relationship is only worth sustaining if both partners regard it as being based on mutual love. At the same time, the best for the child is to grow up with both parents. These two discourses, the one about romantic love and the one about the good childhood, are to some extent contradictory and may create dilemmas. Brita is one participant who emphasizes that the child itself is reason enough to endure a relationship, or at least to try harder than otherwise. This is not a common positioning within the discussions. The participants are more prone to stress that an unsatisfactory relationship is damaging for both child and parents and thus separation is the natural solution. Brita is the only one who is close to rejecting the discourse on love, but it is nothing more than a mere suggestion. Instead she alters her positioning in the affirmative. This

becomes evident when Brita's positioning throughout the interview is studied as a fruitful complement to the exploration of her positioning towards specific discourses at specific moments.

It is common for the focus group participants to express concerns about whether, and in that case how, parenthood will affect the relationship. There is no indication of notions that pregnancy, child-birth and possible strains of parenthood should lead to decreasing expectations and greater tolerance to change. In Bernhardt and Goldscheider's work (2006) some informants seemed more worried about negative consequences of parenthood than others. Those who did were less likely to have entered parenthood at the time of the second survey four years later. It is not possible for me to draw such conclusions from the focus group data. What it is possible to say is that deferment of parenthood was often understood in terms of not knowing what to expect and worrying about negative outcomes, for instance with regard to the romantic relationship.

By exploring individual narration the following pattern emerged: Many of the focus group participants who persistently brought up risks with parenthood had grown up with divorced parents. Those participants were in general the ones who most decisively connected an auspicious childhood with a nuclear family arrangement and stressed that relationship dissolution had to be avoided. Not all, however, embrace the nuclear family discourse. Max dismisses it. To him love is liquid, to use Bauman's (2003) term; there is no forever lasting love to be found; romantic love comes and goes. What is interesting here is that Max refutes the nuclear family but not romantic love. When love is no longer there it is to be found elsewhere. To Max, this is in the best interests of both the children and the parents.

## Discussion

### *Equal parenthood: images of men and women, mothers and fathers*

There are two influential discourses that impact on how motherhood and fatherhood are pictured in the focus group data: the discourse on gender equality, which includes the new father image, and the discourse on

biology, which contains the notion of the sexes as having different characteristics and predispositions to care. Both discourses are prevalent, but the latter appears to take precedence. Fathers' parenthood practices are not depicted as being equivalent to mothers'. This is talked about as a matter of fact and as problematic; the mother's 'natural' closeness to the child is referred to as an impediment to the father's ability to practice (good) fatherhood. Most participants feel that good fatherhood is defined in relation to the man's relationship and proximity to the child: it is 'child orientated' (Bekkengen 2002) and separated from the man's relationship to the mother. But there are also those who picture the respectable father in a more traditional way, as the distant breadwinner. To them, the mother is and should be the main carer – the man's fatherhood is not threatened by her close relationship to the child, but by the gender equality discourse that portrays men and women as interchangeable, causing the man to feel unneeded.

Previous research has shown that gender equality ideals run counter to recommendations originating from developmental psychology, which stresses the significance of the mother-child bond and breastfeeding as essential aspects of children's mental and physical health (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001; Kugelberg 1999; Wall 2001). Contemporary motherhood, in Sweden and in the Western world, is imbued with the dilemma of caring for others and caring for oneself. That a mother prioritizes family is taken for granted and implicit in what connotes womanhood, but it conflicts with the gender equality ideal, which entails that women, too, should look for self-fulfilment outside the domestic sphere (Brembeck 1998; Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001; Hays 1996; Kugelberg 1999; Stoppard 2000; Wall and Arnold 2007). The position of embracing a traditional form of motherhood and the concurrent, unchallenged position of dismissing the image of women as naturally predisposed to caring and emphasizing individual needs and desires show the prevalence of this ambivalence in the focus group data.

### *The primacy of romantic love*

This dissertation suggests that for many individuals the decision to enter parenthood is related to tension and anxiety. Will I change? Will my partner change? Will the relationship change? What will happen if things change? A fear of change is prominent. It is a fear of making a decision without knowing the outcome. Why then is change such a threatening scenario when the transition to parenthood is discussed in relation to the romantic relationship?

My first suggestion to why change is dreaded is connected to the discourse on romantic love. Romantic love, that is to find forever lasting, pulsating, emotional and physical attraction in a partner, has in the secularized world, as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) argued, come to be the meaning of life. But what happens to the romantic relationship when a child is born? What happens when a new object of love, a new individual that demands attention and care, comes into the world? The focus group participants talk about possible strains that parenthood might have on the intimate relationship; they are aware of a risk that other studies state. That is, the transition to parenthood appears to have a negative effect on relationship satisfaction (Shapiro et al. 2000; Wadsby and Sydsjö 2001).

Romantic love and everyday family life are hard to realize jointly. This emerges when analysing the focus group data. Much of the discussions are centred on the family we live with (to use Gillis' 1996 way of reasoning), that is, the everyday family life with constraints and conflicts, rather than on the mythical, romanticized family. This is very interesting. There is an awareness of that everyday family life may not be conflict free and harmonized, but despite this the discourse on romantic love is not rejected or modified; it remains strong and does not waver. A love relationship is believed to be worth sustaining only on the premises outlined by Giddens (1992), and is in this respect liquid (Bauman 2003). To me, this refusal of accepting change and rejecting the idea of romantic love indicates that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) are right in proposing romantic love as the new meaning of life, which clashes with, or rather is a reason for, as they put it, the everyday chaos of love.

### *The conflicts of flexibility*

The findings of this study support much of what is said within the sociological theory of individualization and modernization. The second aspect I would like to discuss of why change is talked about in such negative terms in the focus groups renders comprehension when related to this brand of theorizing. Flexibility and mobility are highly valued characteristics and required of a person in societies where “institutionalized individualism” (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002) permeates economic, political and social life. To have a life of one’s own and to focus on individual self-fulfilment are promoted, perhaps particularly in societies like Sweden where family life is organized around the dual earner (and dual-carer) principal. The question for people living in those kinds of national contexts is: How will parenthood affect work and leisure time? Or rather: How will parenthood not impose on life? Change is to a large extent dreaded.

Family life and the child tie people down in some respects, and make it harder to be flexible and mobile with regard to work, and also socially. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) said that this is one big attraction with parenthood – it is a refuge from self-fulfilment and flexibility. However, it may also cause dilemmas due to different notions of how to be and how to live. Should one live a settled life and be a good parent or live a mobile, flexible life as a good worker (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Hays 1996). In addition, the notion of liquid love fosters both men and women to strive for financial, individual independence, to be able to manage by oneself and provide for the child if the intimate relationship ends in separation. In accordance with Bauman (2003: 34), the focus group participants portray the “drive for freedom” and the “craving for belonging” as being hard to merge. Love and intimacy towards a partner is something highly desired among Swedish young adults, and so is parenthood. Many, however, live alone (Engwall 2005). The focus group participants portray the nuclear family and having a child together with another person to be the ideal, but notions of romantic love curtail this ideal.

### *'Non-modern' aspects of parenthood and intimacy*

It has been argued and shown in previous studies that modern family life is saturated by ambivalence and contradictions. Societal and social demands on individuality are in opposition to notions of family life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997). In addition, I would like to suggest that ideas of what should characterize a good intimate relationship (see Giddens 1992) correspond to the notion of living one's own life and to first and foremost considering one's own needs and desires; the characteristic of life in the contemporary Western world that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) outlined. That is, if the romantic relationship is seen to restrain individual happiness and self-fulfilment, it might be better to move on. Notions of what is best for the child, on the other hand, relate to the nuclear family discourse and thoughts about settling down. Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten (1997: 114, 192) called the "child non-modern" in that it is a hindrance to the individualistic aspirations of the parents. My suggestion is that the romantic relationship is also non-modern in this respect, in that emotional commitment connotes compromise and a certain degree of dependence.

### *Individualization through the Swedish welfare system*

It is possible to live alone with dependant children in Sweden. The Swedish social welfare system is generous with, for instance, subsidized daycare, housing allowances, monthly child allowance and more. Family benefits enable the combination of lone parenthood and paid work, and promote equal numbers of women and men in the paid labour force. It could be argued that Sweden with its welfare state has become one of the most individualistic countries in the world. It renders possibilities for men and women, mothers and fathers to manage on their own. Many participants in the focus group data refer to the social security net when talking about relationship dissolution with children involved. The welfare system makes them certain that they would manage financially as single parents. Other aspects appear more worrisome about separating as a parent, such as not being able to fulfil the idea of responsible parenthood and what is best for the child and the idea of romantic and forever lasting love.

## Strains and gains

Parenthood in the contemporary Western world is connected to monetary costs, less time for career and leisure time activities, decreasing flexibility and mobility, increasing worries and concerns, and the physical costs of childbearing, delivery and breastfeeding (Fawcett 1988). Parenthood is also connected to new responsibilities. There has been an increasing child-centeredness in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, with auspicious childhoods being related to parental abilities to bond with and stimulate the child (Donzelot 1979; Gleichmann 2004; Halldén 1991; Hays 1996). Happy and healthy children connote good parenting and many young adults ask themselves whether they possess enough qualities to raise a child in the best possible way (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997). However, there are also many benefits associated with parenthood. It is suggested in one of the previous chapters that entering parenthood constitutes maintaining normalcy, which correlates with parenthood being a marker of adulthood (Fawcett 1988) (in good and bad, as has been discussed). Parenthood brings social status (in certain social circles) and new experiences; it provides a permanent individual to love, it is a link between generations, and it results in a new family member who tightens relations between families and a new social relation to rely on (Fawcett 1988; Morgan and Berkowitz King 2001; Rose Fischer 1988). Parenthood may be restraining in many ways, but a child may also serve as a justification to challenge the individualization discourse; a child becomes a legitimate reason for ‘settling down’ and focusing less on oneself (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995).

Important to note is that the costs and benefits of parenthood may vary between people of different social class and gender. Cost and benefits are socially constructed and thus dynamic and changing, but they are also material – that is, social and societal constructions affect everyday lives and bodies in different ways (Stoppard 2000). Stoppard (2000) argued that women, in general, bear most of the strains of parenthood. The construction

of gender, of womanhood and manhood, has caused mothers to take on a larger share of childcare and household duties while fathers spend more time on paid labour and leisure time activities (Bekkengen 2002; Drew 1998; Jensen 1995; Kugelberg 1999; Statistics Sweden 2003a). Notions of costs and benefits also vary between individuals. Vicarious experiences of parenthood and individual subjectivities appear to have an impact on how life with children is perceived and valued (Bernardi 2003; Fawcett 1988; Morgan and Berkowitz King 2001).

Why do you think the mean age for first-time parents has increased when comparing with the 1970s? How do/did you imagine life as a parent compared to life without a child? These were two of the questions that guided the focus group discussions. The pros and cons of parenthood, 'trials and triumphs' as Palkovitz (1988) and Sussman (1988) put it, were implied in the discussions. The cons were often used in the process of understanding one's own deferment of parenthood, and the pros when justifying why parenthood, despite concerns about the negative implications, was looked upon as a desirable state to enter. The purpose of this chapter is to scrutinize the strains and gains of parenthood as they are referred to and drawn upon in the focus group data. All empirical chapters contain negative and positive depictions of parenthood. Concerns about the possible strains that parenthood may place on the romantic relationship, for instance, are raised, and the possible negative implications of fatherhood in comparison to motherhood are brought up for discussion, as was demonstrated in the previous chapter. In the following exploration, however, the looking glass is on the specific illumination of and positioning in relation to the constraints and benefits of parenthood. Insight into notions of constraint is important when speculating on impacts on the timing of parenthood, as is insight into notions of benefits. As Fawcett argues: "costs of children play a critical role in controlling human fertility, that is, in keeping childbearing well below the physiological maximum. They also interact with the benefits of children in complex ways to influence the timing of childbearing" (1988: 16). Costs and benefits of becoming a parent vary in time and space, concurrently with the value of children and ideas about the good childhood and the good adult life (Fawcett 1988; Jensen 1996; Sandin 2003; Zelizer 1985).

The focus group data signify individual ways of referring to common, cultural discourses on the strains and gains of parenthood; they

provide a complex picture of aspects that could engender a deferral of parenthood. The participants draw on the notion of self-fulfilment, on notions of age, on notions of being settled and of feeling ready and secure. They refer to uncertainties and risks connected to parenthood. The focus here is on their reasoning about the everyday strains and benefits of raising a child. This chapter is similar to other parts of the dissertation, but is also more thorough with regard to illuminating the discourse on parenthood.

## **Costs of parenthood**

### ***A restraining life***

When the participants talk about parenthood – how they imagine and imagined parenthood – they recurrently refer to a range of tribulations. The uncertainties and hardships parenthood is portrayed to entail are talked about as reasons for deferring the transition. The focus group participants bring up straining aspects of parenthood similar to Fawcett's (1988) enumeration presented above, but the monetary costs of parenthood are not commonly brought up in the discussions.

So what tribulations do the focus group participants refer to? Parenthood is talked about as a life involving lack of sleep, lack of energy, stress with regard to organizing the activities of everyday life, and less time for friends, one's partner and oneself. Parenthood may connote a lifestyle change, which is regarded as a risk in this sort of reasoning. Sarah (30, FG1), for instance, recurrently refers to the hardships of parenthood, and the constraining and draining impact it could have on her life. She is one of the participants with experiences of growing up with divorced parents, and it is feasible to suggest that she wishes to avoid ending up as her mother, a single parent, according to her accounts throughout the interview. In the interview passage below, Sarah's positioning is challenged by Cleo, and although affected by Cleo's argument, Sarah maintains her position. The passage is taken from a part in which the consequences of having a child are discussed.

Sarah: Hard, above all, to be so tired all the time. I mean you're tired anyway. God.

Cleo: But when you finally have a child I think you look at it in another way. It's not going to be hard in the way I think today that it's going to be.

Sarah: No. It's going to be like normal, probably. Routine. But still, it could be really hard as well, you have to, I guess there are many people who think like that, that it's not always a bed of roses. (Sarah 30, Cleo 28, FG1)

Cleo represents a common positioning in the focus group discussions. Cleo, as well as Sarah, refers to the potential negative aspects of parenthood many times, and portrays herself as being rather worried about the possible constraints that parenthood could entail. But Cleo lightens up the dark picture she helped in shaping by referring to the entry into parenthood as something that automatically changes a person's preferences regarding how to live: "when you finally have a child I think you look at it in another way. It's not going to be hard in the way I think today that it's going to be", she proposes. Sarah does not reject Cleo's positioning of parenthood as triggering a change in desires, "it's going to be like normal, probably" she affirms, but it does not appear to comfort her. She is persistent in portraying parenthood as potentially very difficult, and this correlates with how she refers to change throughout the interview.

Sarah does not embrace the notion of parenthood as naturally altering desires, such as others like Cleo do. On the contrary, Sarah is consistent in expressing a wish to live as much as possible as before; but parenthood may change life and she may find parenthood restricting. The dilemma that Cleo in part undertakes is sustained for Sarah. Jill, in another focus group, argues as Sarah does, and her positioning imbues the same consequences. When talking about if and when and to have a child, she says:

Jill: I think what's been influencing me a little, at least the last years, is that the ones you talk to who have children, my friends and my sister and such, that those girls, or mums, say that they don't have time for anything. 'Yes, I didn't have time for that, I don't have time to go to the gym, yes we can't go out, we can't walk around town in peace and quite'. They complain about not being able

Lisa: constantly tired

Jill: yes, constantly tired. And this, this has discouraged me a bit

because I have a great need to, to do stuff. (Jill 28, Lisa 32, FG6)

Jill talks about herself as being a person who ‘has a great need to do stuff’. Doing stuff, in her reasoning, does not imply parental practices such as caring for and minding a child, but being free and independent to do whatever one wishes at the moment, such as exercising and “walk(ing) around town in peace and quite”. Jill positions herself in the affirmative of the individualization discourse, and her reasoning, to me, is in line with Lee’s (2005) suggestion that practicing independence is essential for people in the Western world. Parenthood, as it is portrayed in the data and by Jill, is not connected to independence, and becomes problematic in this respect; parenthood ‘settles a person down’ whether one wishes to settle or not. Jill draws on experiences from her social network; the parental lives of her friends and sister inform her that parenthood entails restrictions on ‘the need to do stuff’.

In the data, friends, acquaintances and relatives are recurrently referred to as being important sources of information about the possible outcomes of parenthood. This supports demographic research on social influence (see e.g. Bernardi 2003; Bongaarts and Watkins 1996). The following quotation of Amanda is another example of how observations of friends and relatives could be discouraging.

Amanda: You get a bit deterred as well, actually. Some Christmas Eves with Bill’s sister’s children we’ve left like ‘we’ll never’ [have children]. (...) Then you think that it’s different with your own children, of course. But at the same time you look at these parents, how damn tired they are. But I see some of my friends’ children and it’s, like it’s really difficult to imagine how it would be, I think. You have to throw yourself in, when you finally do it, and see to it that you come out on the other side somehow. But that’s what they all say, ‘it’s a new life’. (31, FG3)

Parenthood is a new life, in many respects harder compared to the life of the childless. That is the content of Amanda’s reasoning. The account above signifies the dilemma that was evident in the interview passage with Cleo and Sarah. Amanda says that “then you think it’s different with your own children, of course. But at the same time you look at these parents, how damn tired they are”. The uncertain outcome of parenthood and the dilemma it causes is exemplified here. As a parent,

parenthood may not appear as restricting and hard as when looking from the outside, but on the other hand it may. Amanda concludes: “it’s really difficult to imagine how it would be” and ‘solves’ the dilemma of uncertainty by stating that “you have to through yourself in” and “see to it that you come out on the other side somehow”.

The focus group data contain a small sample of people and almost twice as many women as men, but what can be said based on this material is that participants expressing the most concerns about the possible negative outcomes of parenthood are women. There is nothing peculiar about this when one considers social influence theory (Bernardi 2003; Bongaarts and Watkins 1996), previous studies suggesting that mothers are regarded as primarily responsible for the child (see e.g. Bekkengen 2002; Hays 1996; Phoneix and Woollett 1991; Stoppard 2000; Wall and Arnold 2007), and feminist poststructuralist theory on the construction of subjectivity (Davies and Harré 1990; Mauthner and Hey 1999; Weedon 1987). People gain experiences from the social network “[a]nd those who develop their particular concept of mother in anticipation that they will one day be positioned as mother will do so differently from someone who knows that they will never be so positioned” (Davies and Harré 1990: 52). That is, vicarious experiences of motherhood differ from vicarious experiences of fatherhood, and as a woman, experiences of women and mothers are central in shaping the picture of the potential negative and positive outcomes of parenthood. The strains of parenthood are feasibly more obvious to women than to men, as research shows that life changes to a greater extent for mothers than it does for fathers; mothers get less time for leisure activities and work, and in this respect life as a mother is comparatively restricting (Bekkengen 2002; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Hays 1996; Kugelberg 1999; Stoppard 2000). Jill’s, Amanda’s, and Sarah’s positioning is reasonable in this regard.

### *Parents’ talk*

When parents are asked how they remember picturing parenthood before they decided to try for a child, their answers correspond with those of participants with no children. The parents report that they felt worried about the possible consequences and about sacrifices they would have to

make (FG2, FG4). Some say that they were concerned about whether they would actually manage the ordeal they imagined parenthood to be. Jennifer, for instance, describes her notion of parenthood with the following words:

Jennifer: Well, I had this perception that it's only trying to have a child. That it's screaming, shouting. I had this picture of walking around Åhléns [a detail store] at Christmas and just lots of screaming children in the background, and I get really nervous and just want to get out when I stand in the queue. That's what I thought life with children would be like, but now, now I hardly notice screaming. No, now I've totally softened in my attitude. (36, parent, FG4)

It is not an alluring picture of parenthood that Jennifer says she had prior to her own life as a parent. She and the other participants in the interview refer to themselves as not being keen on children and as not wanting to be restricted by a child, affirming independence and individual freedom when justifying their postponement of parenthood, similar to parents in the other groups (FG2, FG8). When they finally decided to embark on parenthood, the risk of infertility surfaced, and they describe the pregnancy as a time filled with worrying that something would go wrong. As should be clear by now, the discourse on risk stands out clearly in the data. The referral to oneself as worried and concerned is legitimate, although some participants try to improve the picture by 'solving' positions, such as the affirmative depiction of change and the welfare state as a security blanket in case of separation.

Giddens (1991) argued that people in the Western world are subjected to a number of risk and uncertainties that they try to avoid through reflection, calculation and planning. Past experiences are connected to the present and to future potential scenarios, and the individual is looked upon as the master of her/his life. There is not much left to providence; a person should reflect over possible choices, take the best opportunities at hand and keep her-/himself informed of potential risks. My suggestion is that the focus group discussions mirror the societal saturation of risk and individualization (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Caplan 2000; Giddens 1991; Lee 2001). Reflecting over potential scenarios and worrying about different risks come across as normalized, socially accepted and perhaps even expected. Referring to risk

may imply practicing responsible behaviour; it is a way of positioning oneself as a responsible individual, and this is feasibly of particular importance to parents and parent-to-be, those who will be responsible for a child.

Many of the parents talk about parenthood as being easier than expected (FG2, FG4). Agneta (FG4), for instance, says that she loves her child more than she thought she would, and that bringing the child along on different occasions was easier than expected. Easy delivery, uncomplicated breastfeeding and quiet and happy children are also brought up as positive, rather unexpected experiences. Several participants state that they probably would have entered parenthood sooner had they know it would turn out the way it did. Though I do not wish to refute the parents' experiences, it could be argued that this reasoning implicitly serves to portray the child as healthy and good and themselves as successful, loving parents who enjoy the irreversible state they have put themselves in. The parents do not portray the entry into parenthood as free from friction. This is evident when the accounts throughout the discussions are scrutinized. A hard delivery, baby blues, straining impacts on the relationship, colic, and a changed lifestyle are brought up as private accounts of the consequences of parenthood.

Eva and Dan (FG8) picture parenthood as harder than anticipated – as more restricting and more of a lifestyle change. These two participants had the longest experiences of parenthood, that is, they had the oldest children of the parents in the data. One of the children was soon to attend daycare and the other had just started. This may play a part in why Eva and Dan positioned parenthood as more of a change, in comparison to the other groups containing parents. Eva reflects over her experiences of motherhood in the following way.

Eva: I've been thinking about this, what you're prepared for in life. I thought about that a lot after having my child. My parents worked, both of them. My mum was working as well and I was at daycare when I was little, and that wasn't too common because there were still quite many mums, in our generation, who stayed at home at least until [the child was in] school age (...). And I have, that is, the focus when I grew up has always been on getting an education, a job, and fulfilling oneself and, well my parents never used those words but it's been really important for them to try to get me to get a post-upper secondary school education and a job, and then you may settle down

and have this family. (...) But the focus has never been on that so, so our mothers, in our generation, in comparison to their mothers, haven't prepared us a whole lot for family life, as there mums possibly did in another way. So that's something you get from home, that I, I didn't, I wasn't at all prepared for family life, how it was to have a child and such. (38, parent, FG8)

When Eva looks back at her time as a parent, she makes sense of her experiences by referring to her past – to her upbringing, the relationship with her parents, and the societal context. Eva reflects and concludes that her upbringing did not prepare her for parenthood. The focus was never on how to live as a family and as a parent, but rather on how to live for oneself through a life that included post-upper secondary school studies and a career. She, as a woman, was brought up to regard her own life first and foremost, perhaps, Eva ponders, more so than women of previous generations. Eva pictures parenthood as hard in that she had to prioritize the child and to focus less on herself and her own desires. She had to learn to be patient and to organize life around another individual.

Eva's positioning can be interpreted in many, additional ways. First, it stipulates the gender equality ideal that has grown in impact since the 1960s onwards. The promotion of women's equal rights to paid labour and education, stimulated by family politics, has resulted in high numbers of women attaining higher education and participating in the labour force. Work, education and leisure time activities have come to be of great importance to Swedish women (Brembeck 2003; Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Haas and Hwang 2007; Kugelberg 1999; Sandström 2002). Second, a general characteristic indicated in research studies and in Eva's account is that contemporary men and women know less about how to care for a child than people did in the past; they do not get information from older generations to the same extent, and many have not lived close to children until they have children themselves (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Gleichmann 2004; Sandin and Halldén 2003). Several parents talk about themselves as not having any prior contact with young children before entering parenthood. Perhaps this lack of knowledge and contact increase feelings of uncertainty about what parenthood entails, and perhaps it could explain why the entry into parenthood is positioned as a radical change in life. Third, the focus group participants including Eva only seldom refer to changes in occupational status and income when they

talk about parenthood. Instead, the big change of parenthood is primarily connected to less time for oneself and to restrictions on individual freedom.

Bringing a new person – a dependent child – into one’s life is a lifestyle change, for certain, but perhaps less so in the Swedish context, where most mothers and fathers continue work in the paid labour force, compared to other Western countries. The combination of parenthood and work is thus possible, but perhaps not the combination of the childless life of individual freedom and notions of what is in the best interest of the child. What is a good parent? This is discussed in the following section.

### ***Good enough parent***

Parenthood makes it hard to practice the ideal of independence and mobility, because contemporary Western parenthood is associated with what Hays (1996) called ‘intensive mothering’. The discourse on good parenthood partly contradicts the individualization discourse that contains the ideal of focusing on oneself. The previous chapters suggest that good parenthood means providing the child with a somewhat settled life and with parents who are ready to settle down, that is, who are mature enough to prioritize the needs of the child rather than their own. Some participants, however, refer to more everyday images of what good parenthood entails; they talk about the uncertainty of not being able to accomplish good parenthood as a possible reason to defer the transition and as a possible straining aspect of being a parent. Sarah, for instance, states the following:

Sarah: I can feel, I can sort of feel, like how will I cope [with having a child]? How will I get the time? Like when I get home from work then I’m tired, you have to pick up the children from daycare. Then you think how will I have the energy to stimulate these children as you, as you must, and to help with homework as you should, yes as you sort of should, as you must. (30, FG1)

As I see it, this excerpt is illustrative in two distinctive ways. First, parenthood is depicted as time and energy consuming. A parent is not primarily something a person is, it is something a person does. A parent has to have energy and time to, as Sarah succinctly phrases it, “stimulate these children”. Parenthood, and primarily good parenthood, implies accomplishing; good parenthood is defined by one’s practices.

‘Doing good parenthood’ requires energy and time, which are scarce, perhaps particularly in Sweden where, and this is the second point, fathers and mothers with young children participate in the paid labour force. Swedish men and women live in a political, economic and social environment in which the dual-earner, dual-carer ideal is very strong and highly practiced (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Bernhardt 2005). But Swedish mothers work fewer hours in the paid labour force and spend more time on household duties and caring for children than fathers do (Statistics Sweden 2003c) – women are the primary parents. When Sarah refers to straining aspects of everyday life with children, as in the account above, the father of the child is invisible; she, implicitly, pictures parenthood as a lone endeavour. Several women in the data position themselves similar to Sarah on the matter. Although some refer to their partner as a co-parent, many do not. Sarah talks about “get(ting) home from work” and “pick(ing) up the children from day care”, and “stimulat(ing) the children as you must” – but where is the father to help out with this? The combination of work and parenthood comes across as problematic, in Sarah’s picturing of everyday life as a parent.

The discourse on (good) parenthood is fruitfully explored further by accounts from other focus group participants. Maja reflects over parental responsibilities and says:

Maja: I think more and more is required of parents nowadays. Like, you don’t take things as naturally as you did perhaps a generation ago or even farther back when we were, like when children played on summer holidays and helped out and that’s how it was. Now, there is so incredibly much you have to be able to, to feel that you do [for the child], that you have the energy. There’re some financial aspects to that as well. I mean not everybody can afford their girls and boys having speedway as their interest. (...) And then I think one thing about being a parent that you think of, that you remember having thought of when talking like this, is that you as a parent have to build up a self-confidence in your child that you perhaps didn’t have to fight for in the same way in the past, it was so natural, ‘I am who I am’ sort of. Today you have to be so much to be anyone at all in a group of people. (26, parent, FG2)

Maja, already a parent, talks more in general terms about parental responsibilities, while Sarah more pointedly refers to concerns of her own.

Maja has already entered parenthood and is thus in another position and has other experiences than Sarah. The interest here, however, is to explore the discourse on parenthood. Similar to Sarah (and other focus group participants) Maja proposes that parenthood requires a lot of a person, more of parents today than of parents in the past. She describes parenthood in the past as being about children coming along and helping the parents, but contemporary parenthood as centred on the child; time, energy and money are spent on the child's development – it is the epitome of intensive parenting (Hays 1996) and it is based on the notion that the child needs this kind of attention to grow up as a healthy, self-reliant, independent individual. It is the “child as project” (Halldén 1991) that is pictured – the notion that the child's development and future well-being rely on parental support, stimulation and guidance.

The notion of good parenting has certain consequences. Sarah, for instance, worries about not having enough energy to accomplish intensive parenting, and parents, particularly mothers, feel guilty over not being able to ‘be there for the child’ as much as they would like to (Bekkengen 2002; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Hays 1996; Kugelberg 1999; Stoppard 2000). Amanda (31, FG3) connects parental responsibilities with being able to protect the child from unhappiness and risks of different sorts. In this line of reasoning, good parenthood means being fair, good, protective and supportive in order to stimulate the child's development. A good parent is aware of things that could cause the child harm, and tries to act preventive with regard to these scenarios. This is an extensive and ambitious definition of good parenting, as I see it. Amanda, Maja and Sarah's argumentation signifies a discourse on good parenthood that is evident in the focus group data overall and in other Swedish studies (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Halldén 1991; Kugelberg 1999). A good parent is responsible for the child's happiness and well-being; s/he should give the child the best start possible in life by encouraging its development and by being supportive. The effort involved is great and the risk of failure pertinent. Amanda puts it as follows:

Amanda: Then there's the worry about how it's going to be when they grew up, and if I'm not one step ahead and something happens, like they start using drugs or something [laugh]. I don't know, but I guess I think too much about the future. You worry, but then how will it be when you actually have a little tot, with all the worries? Maybe it just

turns out to be too much all of it?

Disa: You worry about worrying?

Amanda: Yes, I know that's what I'm going to do. [laugh] (...)

Disa: So what is there to worry about? You mentioned drugs.

Amanda: Yes. Everything. Crossing the road, getting hit by a car [laugh]. That they are unhappy. Yes, bullied. (31, FG3)

Drugs, unhappiness, bullying, traffic, and not being 'one step ahead' are aspects that Amanda enumerates as risks that may cause her to fail as a parent. Parents in the contemporary Westerns world are informed of, influenced by, and face different risks, and the discourse on risk includes the notion that children need to be protected from risks both inside and outside the home (James et al. 1998). Amanda worries about worrying. This makes sense in a societal context where risk is 'everywhere' (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), and where "the modern concept of risk colonizes the future, which thereby determines the present" (Caplan 2000: 6). The discourse on risk appears to influence the timing of parenthood.

## **Benefits of parenthood**

Parenthood is connected to costs of different kinds, but most people, women to a slighter higher degree than men, become parents at some stage in life (Departementserien 2001), and the majority of focus group participants talk about parenthood as an anticipated, normalized transition to make. But why do people enter parenthood? What are the benefits and the value of having a child?

The benefits of parenthood do not come across as something people reflect over as much as the possible tribulations. But after having pondered my question of why a child is desirable, a variety of reasons are brought up. Having somebody to love and somebody to get love from are two briefly mentioned aspects, as are joy and happiness. One participant, Ursula (25, FG5) says that having a child implies "get(ting) something that is absolutely yours and your everything". Talking about parenthood in this way correlates with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's suggestion that one important attraction of parenthood is that it entails a bond to another person that no other relationship can give. The child "promises a tie which is more

elemental, profound and durable than any other in this society". The child "is the ultimate guarantee of permanence, providing an anchor for one's life" (1995: 73). But love and happiness are not mentioned to such a great extent when the benefits of parenthood are brought up in the interviews. Other aspects are more prominent.

### ***A changed focus and a progressing life***

#### *A reason for slowing down*

A common answer among both parents and non-parents is that a child legitimates a change of focus in life, from individual self-fulfilment to the child. A child gives a parent someone else to think about and to care for. Nathan's statement illustrates this position, which also accords with Beck and Beck-Gernsheim's (1995) suggestion that parenthood excuses a person from striving for self-fulfilment, this being one of its attractions. Nathan, a parent-to-be, says:

Nathan: It's quite good [to have a child] because it takes away the focus from your own life. It's quite convenient. It's good in a way. It makes things easier, like for example before [I knew I was going to have a child] I was thinking about what to do this summer, to do something fun, but then I found out [that my girlfriend was pregnant] and then it was clear cut what to do – to get a job with the best pay possible. So it's quite convenient in that way. (...) It takes away some of the focus on fulfilling oneself. Well it's easy, isn't it, to just work and earn money. (26, parent-to-be, FG7)

To Nathan, parenthood makes the process of making decisions easier. A responsible parent gets a job in order to provide for the child rather than looking for the perfect, self-fulfilling occupation; parenthood provides the opportunity to focus on the child instead of oneself. Nathan positions himself affirmative towards a notion that other focus group participants (parents and 'non-parents') also refer to – the notion that parenthood to some extent liberates the parents from the expectation that they must 'live life', that is, fill their everyday life with fun, exciting things, career aspirations and socializing. As one of the parents puts it, "it's okey to stay at home" (Angelina, 32, parent, FG2).

It has been demonstrated before that the ideal happy life is

connected to independence and individual freedom, but another, less alluring side of this life evolves when the benefits of parenthood are discussed. Here, the childless life is portrayed as straining, demanding, and tiring; the argument is thus turned around. The justification of parenthood is that it is a refuge from the childless life, in which constant self-fulfilment and mobility are expected. Elements of the individualization discourse are challenged and refuted in this sort of reasoning, where the self-fulfilling life is pictured as straining rather than emancipating.

### *A progressing life*

One way of picturing parenthood is that it releases a person from self-fulfilment, but another way is to define parenthood as a continuation of self-fulfilment. Nathan, for instance, refers to both these notions in the affirmative. When the deferment of parenthood is justified, parenthood is pictured as restricting for personal development and experiences, but when the desire to enter into parenthood is understood, parenthood is referred to as entailing personal development and progress. Entering into parenthood means 'going on with life' (e.g. Cleo, 28, FG1), and 'wanting to live a family life' (e.g. Jill 28, FG6, Carl 28, FG5) that engenders additional experiences and social contacts. Parenthood is said to offer a new dimension; it provides a possibility to break the routine of the everyday life as a childless adult. The following citation of Amanda summarizes much of what is said in the focus group interviews with regard to the value of having a child.

Disa: Why do you want children? Do you have any thoughts?

Amanda: It leaves a mark [laugh] on the future. Plenty of reasons. I've sort of always wanted children because I think it's sweet, but now I feel a lot that I, Bill is the one I want to have a child with; a perfect combination of the two of us [laughter]. Like it's purely selfish reasons really. I want to live that life. I want to raise a child and to experience how it turns out, and to be part of their development when they learn new things, that's amazing, to be part of a new world, of another generation. Life [as a parent] is so much more intense and outgoing. You meet other people, other mums at the daycare centre and at school and all that. Today life is so narrow. You work and you sort of know this [life]. [Parenthood] gives life a new dimension. (...)

It gives me a new role and a challenge, and a chance to express feelings and love and care, and the excitement of seeing what kind of child you get and how my bad and good sides and the environment may influence the child. (31, FG3)

Amanda presents many reasons for wanting a child: procreation, that it is sweet, that it is something to create and have with her partner; and that it entails a certain kind of life that she wants to live. What I want to illuminate here is how she talks about parenthood as a progressing life, with new challenges and experiences. Amanda's reasoning is a good example of how the same arguments can be used to justify different kinds of life – the life without children and the life with them. In some parts of the interview, Amanda says that she is afraid that parenthood will make her lonely in that she may not get the stimulation from friends that she is used to. In the above quotation, however, she portrays parenthood as a life that enables a person to meet new people and to gain new experiences, aspects that otherwise are predominantly connected to the childless life in the data. This way of picturing the benefits of parenthood suggests, to me, that the individualization discourse predominates and appears to have great influence on the participants' positioning and portrayal of who they are. The predominance of the affirmative positioning towards this discourse suggests that people are strongly influenced by the notion that life should be characterized by continuous development and progress, new experiences and mobility. I believe Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (2002) would understand this positioning as evidence of institutionalized individualism, which includes the societal emphasis on 'having a life of one's own'. A complementary way to understand the emphasis on personal progress is that Western people of today are subjected to high demands for flexibility, owing to increasing economic, political and social uncertainty (Lee 2001), and that these demands are appropriated and 'disguised' as personal desire, owing to the societal emphasis on individual choice and opportunity (Nilsen and Brannen 2002).

### ***Old age security and kinship ties***

#### ***The social value of parenthood***

The discourse on kinship, that is, the ways in which the focus group

participants refer to kin and family, suggests that ties to family and relatives are regarded as highly important. The discourse on kinship is illuminated in discussions on the benefits of parenthood. Specific social benefits come with parenthood, according to the reasoning in the data. One of the most emphasized reasons for entering parenthood, besides parenthood working as a sign of normalcy, is the picture of parenthood as an insurance against loneliness and dull life during older age. The common line of argumentation is that the child provides the parents with somebody 'to live through' and company when the parents grow older; parents are sure of having somebody who comes for visits and somebody to socialize with. A child does not only add value to life in itself – a child has the potential to provide the parents with grandchildren, who in their part enlarge the family and enrich life. Morgan and Berkowitz King (2001) suggested that children of today are social resources to their kin and highly valued as such, and the focus group data support this. The accounts of Michael and Joel are two examples of how this was phrased in the discussions.

Michael: Life would become very dull if you didn't have children, partly because you don't have your own and partly because when you get older you don't get any grandchildren and all that. Not that I've been thinking so far ahead but if you do, things look pretty empty [with no children]. So much joy you miss out on that the children and grandchildren bring. (28, parent, FG2)

Joel: I think that when I'm lying there on my deathbed and, or when I get older and I'm in a retirement home with no visitors, I believe I'd get awfully anxious if I didn't have any children, like when I'm older. I'm totally convinced of that. Imagine all the time as retired from 65 to perhaps you turn 90, that's 30 years being around without any children and grandchildren, and then you see all your friends' grandchildren. (26, FG5)

Michael is a parent and Joel is childless, but they refer to the value of children in similar ways. The life of an older person who does not have children and grandchildren may be 'terribly dull', and by having a child and later on supposedly grandchildren, the parents get a chance to closely follow the lives of other individuals – that is the value of kin. Another social benefit of parenthood and kin is brought up by Sabina (29, FG9). She

states that a child creates and stabilizes eternal kinship ties between people, such as for instance between sisters-in-law. In this way a child ensures the consistency of certain social relations, even if the parents were to separate, which is an all too prominent risk evolving in the focus group discussions and indicated by social scientists (see e.g. Bauman 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Giddens 1992).

### *The biological child*

Kinship is “above all a cultural category” (Åkesson 2001: 130). It is a nearness to other people that is politically and socially defined, and not necessarily connected to biological relations (Åkesson 2001). Specifically, a person may regard close friends as kin, and by law an adopted child may (or may not depending on the historical context) have the same rights to inheritance as biological children. A common answer in the focus groups to why parenthood is desired is that by having a child a person’s genes are reproduced. Additional ways to express this is that a child is a creation of one’s own flesh and blood, leaves something to the future, is a copy of oneself, and reproduces the family. Fagerberg’s study (2000) indicates that this is a common way to argue. Some focus group participants refer to adoption as an alternative to a biological child, and some talk about adoption as a way as good as any to enter parenthood (e.g. Mona, 24, FG5, Dan, parent, 36, FG8, Glen, 24, FG7), but another common statement is that adoption is the last solution to infertility (e.g. Alice and Jonathan, 33 and 29, FG5). As Liam says:

Liam: No, I would adopt only if I couldn’t have kids of my own, because I would like to have that little copy and to pass on my insufferable genes, sort of, to see how it turns out. (25, FG5)

A biological child is highly valued in the focus group data. This is in accordance with Åkesson (2001) and Howell (2003) who showed that the emphasis on biological kin has increased in the Nordic countries during the past century, both in law and socially. Howell (2003) connected this with global, Western discourses on children’s rights and what is in the best interest of the child. In the contemporary kinship discourse, biological kin and origins are closely bound to identity, and it is proclaimed that every

child/person has a right to her/his biological identity. It is feasible to suggest that the argumentation in the focus group data relates to these notions, but also to the notion that Lundin's (2001) study illuminates. Lundin's Swedish study on infertility indicates that a man finds it problematic to view himself as a real man and a woman to view herself as a real woman if s/he cannot conceive a child. Both womanhood and manhood are connected to procreation in this respect, and the focus group data provide other examples of this. Ursula (25, FG5), for instance, raises the scenario of not being able to conceive a child and refers to it as a trauma, because she would feel incomplete and less of a person; only a biological child could fill the desire for a child, she proposes. Jonathan (29, FG5), in the same group as Ursula, says that infertility "would be a rather hard blow to my masculinity, a failure" (see also FG1).

The participants connect the ability to procreate to words such as identity and completeness. One participant, Max (26, FG7) talk about the drive for a biological child being so strong that a new partner would be worth looking for if the present one was infertile. The other participants in the group do not challenge his positioning, and Sarah (30, FG1) positions herself in a similar way when she says that she, if something were wrong with her procreative abilities, would ask her partner to find a new woman so he would not miss out on having a biological child (see also Jonathan, 29, FG5). Thus, some picture a biological child as being superior and possibly the only alternative; other participants refer to adoption in more positive terms, and state they lack a drive for biological procreation (Mona, 24, FG5, Dan, 36, FG8).

## **Discussion**

The discourse on parenthood includes the costs and benefits of parenthood. What are the costs and benefits of parenthood in a particular cultural setting and situation? Swedish young adults' perceptions of future family formation have been explored in previous studies (Bernhardt 2000a, 2000b, 2004; Brannen et al. 2002; Statistics Sweden 2001a, 2001b). These reports state that parenthood is an anticipated transition for most young adults; children are referred to as adding meaning to life. But the costs of

parenthood are also brought up. Men and women talk about being worried about the impact parenthood could have on work and leisure time activities (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006; Brannen, Kugelberg, Das Dorés Guerreiro and Smitshon 2002; Lundqvist and Roman 2003). Bernhardt and Goldscheider's study (2006) shows that those who worried the most deferred the transition to a greater extent than did those who came across as being less concerned.

The costs and benefits of parenthood correlate with the cultural value of the child and notions of good parenting and auspicious childhoods. In the beginning of the 1990s, Halldén (1991) detected two different, but co-existing notions about the child in Swedish parents' talk about parenting and ideal childhoods. These notions were the child as being and the child as project. The child as being means the idea of the child as developing naturally, with the support of parents in terms of their time and commitment. The child as project is connected to a more active role of the parents; the parent's guidance and stimulation are regarded as significant for child development and for the child's future life as an adult. Research of later date indicates that the notion of the child as project has grown in influence in Scandinavia since the beginning of the 1990s, with parenthood being increasingly connected to obligations and responsibilities (Brembeck et al. 2004).

### *The restrictive child: risk and uncertainty*

The focus group data support the picture of the child as project. Far from all participants raise concerns about the obligations parenthood could imply, but it is common to refer to 'being afraid of the responsibility'. Those whose accounts include elaborations of responsible parenthood give the picture of 'intensive' parenting (Hays 1996) as the ideal, although a straining one. Will I have the energy and time to be a good enough parent? How do I protect my child from risks of different kinds? How do I raise my child to have a good self-confidence? How do I keep my child happy? Responsible parenthood is intense and time, energy, and capital consuming in this line of reasoning. Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten (1997) have suggested that the expanding knowledge of and information on child development, good parenting, and risks cause people to ask whether they

will be able to cope with the obligations and responsibilities parenthood is believed to require. People are influenced by the notion that a child's unhappiness is a sign of the parents' failure to acknowledge and act in accordance with what is best for the child, and may feel hesitant to enter parenthood due to notions of what responsible parenthood implies. Alwin (1996) suggested that changes in childrearing, grounded on changing notions about the child, play a role in the decreasing fertility that Western countries have witnessed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Contemporary parenthood is imbued with the idea that children are to be encouraged and raised to be independent, self-reliant individuals who make the most out of educational opportunities. This has caused parenthood to be more time consuming and straining than in the past, when obedience and good manners in a child were the primary indicators of successful parenting (Alwin 1996).

The increasing responsibility of parenthood and of being able to practice good enough parenthood is thus one factor that may cause people to defer parenthood, as previous research and the focus group data indicate. Other possible tribulations of parenthood that appear in the focus groups are strains on the romantic relationship, the bodily implications of childbearing, fatigue, and less time for oneself, including leisure time activities. The outcomes of parenthood are described to be utterly unpredictable; risk and parenthood are correlating concepts, as it appears. Indeed, risks of different kinds saturate the focus group discussions. In a context characterized by institutionalized individualism (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002), where the individual is regarded as responsible for the outcomes of her/his life (and to some extent her/his child's life) rather than structural circumstances being acknowledged, where risks of different kinds are raised and emphasized (Beck 1992; Giddens 1991), and where the prime ideal is to act as an independent, flexible individual (Lee 2001, 2005), it appears logical that the transition to parenthood is depicted as a considered choice filled with insecurity.

My proposal is that feelings of uncertainty are connected also to the standard adulthood model and the notion of the adult as independent, self-reliant, and rational. The standard adulthood model and the predominating notion of the self contrast with what being an adult in the Western world of today really is about, namely being subjected to structuring discursive and material circumstances; and being subjected to ideals and ideas about how to live with a fluctuating, uncertain labour market and precarious romantic

relationships (Blatterer 2005; Lee 2005, 2001). This contradiction may cause people to feel uncertain and immature. In addition, as a consequence of the societal emphasis on risk (Caplan 2000), the morally right thing to do may be to portray oneself as concerned. Being aware of possible risks connotes responsible behaviour. Parenthood is associated with responsible acting as few other positions are, I would argue, and thus, positioning oneself as responsible is of utmost importance for parents or parents-to-be. This may be one reason why tribulations and risks have such prominence in focus group discussions.

### *The valued child*

The discourse on parenthood contains many benefits of becoming a parent, which the focus group participants refer to in their understanding of why parenthood is a desired status to have. One is that the child brings love and happiness to the parents, but this is often raised in relation to the parents growing older. Happiness and well-being at older age is connected to having children and possibly grandchildren, in the focus group reasoning. The child is pictured as providing its parents with social security; it is an insurance against loneliness and unhappiness during older age. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995) proposed that the child promises social stability as no other relationship can, which the focus group data support. Perhaps relationships to kin are more 'impure' and 'traditional' than what comes across in Giddens' (1992) reasoning. Kin relationships, perhaps particularly between child and parents, may be based on another sort of reciprocity than that between friends. The focus group participants use a discourse on kinship that causes me to suggest that children are the people one counts on for company and support when one gets older; no participant mentions friends coming for visits to the retirement home, for instance. In Western contexts, older persons are associated with dependence and immobility, the opposite of the praised characteristics of a person (Hockey and James 1993). In the same way as a child is dependent on her/his parents, an older person may be connected to dependence and kin relationships; kin rather than friends remain when the reciprocity of the pure relationship becomes difficult to maintain.

### *The individualization discourse*

The purpose of this chapter has been to study constructions of costs and benefits of parenthood in the focus group discussions. While doing this, predominant notions of the ideal life appeared, complementing the illumination of the ideal life course, the ideal timing of parenthood, and the ideal family in previous chapters. There is an affirmative positioning of the individualization discourse both when the participants talk about the benefits of parenthood and the benefits of the childless life. The words used to describe benefits are the same, and the notions of what the ideal life implies emerge. The participants talk about benefits as something that enables self-fulfilment in terms of new experiences and new social relationships. Parenthood, when discussed in the affirmative, is depicted as entailing new opportunities, experiences and relationships; parenthood promises further self-fulfilment and development in contrast to stagnation. Surfacing in the data is the predominating ideal of a life 'in progress', but this ideal is also questioned. The argument that parenthood justifies a step back from the scene – to a life where another person is of greater priority than my own self-fulfilment through education, work and leisure time – is evident. The positioning of parenthood as justifying change is, however, ambivalent. Parenthood justifies change to some extent, indeed, but only to some extent. The following chapter is an exploration of the ambivalence imbued in the discourses on change and continuity.

## 8

### **To change and not to change**

This work and previous studies have shown that parenthood in Sweden is associated with the risk of not being able to balance care for family and care for oneself in a satisfying way (Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Lundqvist and Roman 2003). Possible negative effects on work and leisure time are brought up as reasons for deferring the transition (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006; Brannen, Kugelberg, Das Dores Guerriero and Smithson 2002; Lundqvist and Roman 2003). But a recurring, additional notion is that parenthood automatically alters the parents' desires: "Giving privilege to the needs of children was thought of as something that would come with maturity and thus would not contradict personal desires. Once having enjoyed a free, 'selfish life' for a period, many believed that they would then be ready to give priority to children's needs", Brannen, Kugelberg, Das Dores Guerriero and Smithson (2002: 127) concluded based on their study of European young adults. Bailey's British study (1999) points to the ambivalence towards change, the hesitant reasoning on possible implications parenthood may have on life, and the reassuring positioning that parenthood naturally leads to changed preferences (see also Sevón 2005).

The discourse on change is partly understood through notions of self. Can a person change? To what extent can a person change? Subjectivities and selves are socially constructed and situated in time and space (Kitayama et al. 1997); they are constituted through language and discourse (Hollway 1989; Weedon 1987). The predominant notion of self in the Western world is the humanistic self (Freeman 1992; Hollway 1989; Jones 1997; Weedon 1987). The liberal humanistic self emanates from the Enlightenment, when the ecclesiastic authority to define normality and persons was questioned and the notion of the rational, unitary individual praised (Davies et al. 2006). In the contemporary Western world, the predominating notion is to look upon the individual as containing a unitary,

rational self, a self with an essence that does not waver. In addition, the ‘neo-liberal self’ (Davies et al. 2006) influences our subjectivities. Recent global economic and political reforms, resulting in increasing labour market fluctuations, have engendered the neo-liberal self and made individual success dependent on flexibility and mobility. Thus, the neo-liberal self is flexible and mobile, and in a state of ‘constant becoming’ (Davies et al. 2006; Lee 2001, 2005). But it is grounded also on a belief in the rational, unitary, and coherent individual; the neo-liberal self is the contemporary version of the humanistic self, as I see it.

That parenthood is connected to change is evident so far in our exploration. The focus group participants draw on notions of having done other things, being confident in the lasting potential of the romantic relationship, and being ready and mature before entering parenthood. Behind this reasoning is the idea that parenthood engenders change – but the extent of such as change is uncertain. The positioning towards change varies between the participants, but is recurrently imbued with ambivalence. As the previous chapter showed, parenthood is connected with change in the affirmative when benefits of the transition are discussed, but with risk and uncertainty over possible changes when deferment of parenthood is justified.

How then is change that causes ambivalence defined? Or rather, what is it that makes people object to and affirm change? The discourse on change contains constructions of lifestyle ideals and the ideal self. The focus in the present chapter is on the positioning towards change. The chapter shows that change in relation to parenthood is defined in different ways and opposed as well as affirmed.

## **Change and continuity**

The focus group participants recurrently refer to parenthood as naturally engendering new desires and preferences; the changes it entails will not come across as restrictive of personal freedom in this regard. But another prominent way to reason is that the lifestyle before parenthood should be maintained to the greatest extent possible – continuity is given precedence over change. It is common to refer in the affirmative to both these notions

and the positions are not necessarily contradictory. They may be, when change is defined in a particular way, but change and continuity are also used rather complementarily.

### ***Embracing and rejecting change***

#### *Discourse on change*

Carl is a 28-year-old man who lives in a big city while pursuing his vocational college studies. He has been in a relationship with a woman who lives elsewhere for two years. Carl comes across as a person who is quite relaxed about the transition to parenthood – he does not position himself in ways that picture him as worried, and his positioning towards the discourse on change is one example of this. Carl stresses that parenthood naturally changes a person’s priorities and preferences, and thus, there is no need to be concerned; the adjustment of life in accordance with the child will come easily.

Carl: I think you prioritize differently [when entering parenthood]. Ok, perhaps not if you get stuck in the way that somebody comes and tells you ‘well, it’s like this, I’m pregnant and we met a couple of weeks ago, remember?’ But I believe that if you are in a relationship and engage in lots of activities I believe you change your priorities a lot. Not so much that you feel that you have to but because you feel that the child is so important. (...) Because I sort of think that besides the child things won’t appear very important anymore. (28, FG5)

In the chapter on love and family, discussions about the child as a mutual project were explored, and the interview quotes that I used were mainly from the focus group that Carl was in. I showed that Joel (26, FG5) argued that he, as a father, would have little responsibilities towards a child, if he had not been mutually involved in the decision to have it. Carl’s notation in the above quote is probably an effect of Joel’s position, a position that Carl affirms when he says: “I think you prioritize differently. Ok, perhaps not if you get stuck in a way that somebody comes and tell you ‘well, it’s like this, I’m pregnant and we met a couple of weeks ago’”. Carl affirms Joel’s argument that the child must be mutually wanted and planned for the inner desire to change life to appear. Or rather, he positions himself as being a person who does not wish to object to Joel’s statement,

although he does not fully embrace Joel's position.

Parenthood entails quite a radical change, according to Carl, but it is a positive change: "I believe you change your priorities a lot. Not so much that you feel that you have to but because you feel that the child is so important". In other parts of the interview, Carl depicts parenthood as a life with new dimensions and opportunities. Throughout the interview, he emphasizes the benefits of parenthood rather than the risks and uncertainties. Another informant who positions change in the affirmative is Nathan (26, parent-to-be, FG7). Like Carl, Nathan does not bring up any concerns and risks related to parenthood, but takes a 'pragmatic' approach, "what happen happens, sort of". The risk that parenthood may have a negative impact on leisure time is solved by Nathan; he stresses that he has no leisure time activities that are important to him. Parenthood becomes less 'frightening' to Nathan in this way. He embraces the possible impact parenthood may have on life rather than depicting it as daunting. This may partly be a consequence of Nathan's status as a parent-to-be; he justifies his decision to enter parenthood through his positioning.

In the focus groups, there is a general and recurrent emphasis on having time of one's own, even as a parent. This time is connected to individual self-fulfilment, and self-fulfilment is related to public activities. Nathan says in the interview that he does not have a great need for self-fulfilment and he embraces the notion of change. He depicts parenthood as an excuse to stop the self-fulfilling venture, and objects to what to him appears to be a general social pressure. Nathan is one of few who explicitly question the aim of continuous self-fulfilment in relation to work, education and a busy leisure time. He, however, has certain attributes that allow him to reject this kind of public self without exposing himself to the risk of losing social status. He is at the end of his medical school studies, and medicine is one of the most prestigious university-level degrees in Sweden. My suggestion is that training to become and to work as a physician connotes high aspirations, drive, self-fulfilment and other positive attributes. Social and societal associations with physicians impact on the way others position Nathan and the positions that are available for him to affirm and reject. Displaying a public self and self-fulfilling ambitions could be of greater significance for men and women with low-status occupations, although this is difficult to support based on the present data.

### *Discourse on continuity*

Joel (26, FG5) also refers to change in the affirmative, but his account includes different reasons for why change is desired and his positioning wavers in the affirmative of both change and continuity.

Joel: I look at this friend of mine, who's 40 and who's training, working and having children, and you can tell that he sort of, he's not feeling well because of this, you have to have time for recreation. That's why I think it may be nice when you get a bit older, family life may be a lot quieter than how you live today. Everybody talks about 'oh it's so hard to drive the children to daycare'. I won't think it's hard to take the children to daycare. Like there's not one bit of stress in that if you plan. Parents complain, like what kind of protected upbringing did they have? What, really, has been so hard in their lives? Probably nothing, then, clearly, it's hard to have a child. They had it too easy when they grew up. They didn't work in the garden; they didn't chop wood; they didn't repaint the house. (...) No. No and I believe this has lots to do with parents separating and people not being able to cope with stress, they are, they are so sensitive people today, and lazy. (26, FG5)

There are many things said in Joel's quote. First and foremost, he takes an affirmative position towards the notion that parenthood offers a good life and is a legitimate reason to 'slow down'. Joel starts out by stating that it would be too hard to try to combine the childless lifestyle with parenthood; parenthood justifies a 'slow down' in this respect. Desiring parenthood means desiring a calmer way of living, Joel reasons. Joel refers to the straining effect parenthood had on a friend of his, a friend who tried to live like before. But Joel does not appear to connect his friend's life as a parent with people in general, because Joel goes on by criticizing people who portray parenthood as hard: "That's why I think it may be nice when you get a bit older, family life may be a lot quieter than how you live today. Everyone talks about 'oh it's so hard to drive the children to daycare'. I won't think it's hard to take the children to daycare. Like there's not one bit of stress in that if you plan."

Joel refers to parents that 'complain' as overly sensitive and lazy, rather than depicting them as people who try hard to combine the life they

had as childless with parenthood. Joel pictures himself as a person who would not complain about life as a parent, because he is used to hard work. It is not hard to drive the children to daycare if you plan, Joel states. When the discussion goes on, Joel positions himself closer in the affirmative of the continuity ideal. He draws on his previous position that parenthood is easier than it is often portrayed to be, and probably would be possible to combine with one's way of living prior to having the child. The notion of contemporary parents as overly sensitive and lazy is given superiority over the image of the friend who is "not feeling well" because he is "training, working and having children".

### *Ambivalent positions*

The discourses on change and continuity contain two predominating images of parenthood: the one in which parenthood naturally leads to new priorities and desires, and the one in which continuity is emphasized as the ideal. Both images are influential, but the following quote of Jill illuminates the ambivalence they recurrently create. Jill says:

Jill: Like I believe it's going to be a change [having children] but I also believe that you want this change, because when you have children you want, you want to be with the child, I believe. It's like everybody says, they don't get it, why didn't they have it earlier, and such. At the same time I'm a bit worried that I won't be able to go to the gym by myself and such. (28, FG6)

Jill draws on the notion that parenthood naturally entails a change in preferences, "because when you have children you want, you want to be with the child, I believe". But she also refers to the ideal of maintaining the lifestyle one had prior to the child. She says: "I'm a bit worried that I won't be able to go to the gym by myself and such". The pattern of Jill's positioning throughout the interview implies that she is worried about the impact of parenthood. She states that parenthood will lead to changing desires, but she is concurrently anxious about not being able to continue the life she lives at the present. Parenthood is unpredictable and partly connected to dependence and to being restrained, and this becomes problematic due to the predominant ideal of 'having one's own life' (Beck

and Beck-Gernsheim 1995) and of ‘performing independence’ (Lee 2005). Perhaps parenthood does not result in new desires after all? Perhaps parenthood will turn out to be restricting and connected to sacrifice? Jill, as other focus group participants, depicts parenthood as naturally entailing a changed self that leads to new priorities and ways of living. Affirming change downplays risks and depicts the transition to parenthood more positively, but the uncertainty of parenthood continues to hover uncomfortably, as it seems.

There are different ways of handling the dilemma that the ideal of continuity and the notion of change may cause. Some participants embrace change to a greater degree than others do. Cleo and Jasmine take this position throughout the interview. They portray the transition to parenthood as the result of a desire to enter a new phase, contrary to another group member, Sarah, who endorses the discourse on continuity.

Sarah: We’ve got a great example of a girl who lives just like before, who has a child, and that’s wonderful to see, I think. When you look at Marie, who does everything, it feels like wow, that’s how it should be, she’s doing exactly the same things as before and it works out with her boyfriend and.

Jasmine: But I don’t know if that’s the way I want it to be.

Cleo: No.

Sarah: Really? I think that feels

Cleo: Because when I want children

Jasmine: When I want children I want a family, I mean, to live a bit more like that. That’s how I feel.

Cleo: Yes, then I enter another phase.

(...)

Disa: So you two feel that it’s, well a bit strange to continue to live the same way, or?

Jasmine: Not strange but I want to proceed in some way when I have a child, I feel.

Cleo: Yes, something new.

Jasmine: And not continue having coffee out and going to the pub. (Sarah 30, Jasmine 28, Cleo 28, FG1)

Should a parent live as before to the extent possible or should life be changed in a radical way? For Sarah, the former alternative is the attractive one, while Jasmine and Cleo turn to the latter. “When you look at Marie, who does everything, it feels like wow, that’s how it should be,

she's doing exactly the same things as before and it works out with her boyfriend", Sarah says. Jasmine and Cleo challenge her picture of continuity as the ideal, but Sarah is consistent throughout the interview in how she positions herself towards the discourse on change – she affirms continuity, while Jasmine and Cleo confirm their positioning elsewhere. Jasmine, for instance, says: "I don't think that life is the only thing that changes. I believe that I as a person change, that you become a completely different person in some way", and Cleo supports her in this. But it is not a change perceived without some hesitation. Both Jasmine and Cleo, like Sarah, refer with worry to the potential negative effects parenthood could have on life, such as not being able to socialize with friends in the same way as prior to having a child.

### ***Focusing on oneself and focusing on the child***

#### ***Maintaining a public self***

The most common positioning in the focus group data is to draw on the continuity discourse. Maintaining a public, self-fulfilling self surfaces as a strong ideal. Parents having experienced a great deal before entering parenthood, and continuing to prioritize their own needs and time are depicted as important. Too much self-sacrificing and too much focus on the child do not constitute being a good parent, as is expressed in the focus groups. The following dialogue is an example of this sort of reasoning.

Brita: I don't look upon it in this way that you have a child and then you see how that child is exactly and then you adjust your life to that. Obviously I do understand that it's a big change, and that you have to change many practical things, and that you may have to give up lots of your own time to get the family situation to work, but life doesn't end. This little person who arrives, this child, is moving in, in an already existing family, and has to learn how things work. (...)

Lisa: It's about what is best for the child as well. That you as a parent don't engage in the child 500 percent but also, I mean you do engage in the child but you must have your own life as well, and the child has to come along with that life. So that you don't let go of everything, because you see sometimes that some stop all socializing, all leisure time interests and focus on the child 24 hours each day, and not only the first year but the rest as well, and are mum fulltime and then there's only time for work. But then I know many who do have time

for a life, and the children are part of that life. (Brita 28, Lisa 32, FG6)

Brita and Lisa are two childless women with university degrees. Brita has lived with her partner for many years and Lisa is about to move in together with her boyfriend of a year. They refer to themselves as being quite eager to enter parenthood. The content of Brita and Lisa's argumentation is that the child should become part of the parents' life rather than the dictator of it. A common way of arguing in the data is illustrated by Lisa's referral to acquaintances that have 'stopped living life': "you must have your own life as well, and the child has to come along with that life. So that you don't let go of everything, because you see sometimes that some stop all socializing, all leisure time interests and focus on the child 24 hours each day, and not only the first year but the rest as well, and are mum fulltime and then there's only time for work". The individualization discourse saturates Brita's and Lisa's reasoning and positioning, as I see it. The ideal of 'having a life of one's own' that Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002) depicted, and the great impact this ideal has had on Western women and men, evidently and recurrently appear in the data. The parents should continue to 'live life', both for their own and the child's sake, the focus group participants state. It is not enough to focus on work and family; parents should have an active leisure time as well.

The accounts of Brita and Lisa exemplify how life is connected to public activities and to public selves. The interview passage above is also an example of the prevalence of the gender-equal discourse, where a woman's right and obligation to leisure time is pronounced – being a mum "fulltime" with "only time for work" is not pictured as an alluring alternative. That the woman returns to work after having a child is taken for granted in this reasoning, like in most of the discussions.

The ideal of continuity is predominantly ascribed high status in the focus group data, and denigrating terms are commonly used when the opposite is referred to. For instance, in one focus group (FG2), 'too much focus on the child' is said to be damaging to the child's (future) personality. Another example of how change is depicted negatively is Glen and Max's (FG7) exchange:

Glen: Hopefully you don't all of a sudden [when entering parenthood] turn old and dull or sort of change. But it's another sort of responsibility, for sure.

Max: If you do turn old and dull you probably do the child a bad turn.  
(Glen 24, Max 26, FG7)

“Hopefully you don’t turn old and dull”, says Glen, “or sort of change”. But “it’s another sort of responsibility”. Risk and uncertainty are evident in Glen’s talk. ‘Hopefully’ means that the outcome is not certain, as a parent you may actually become old and dull, because parenthood implies “another sort of responsibility”. This responsibility is difficult to define and to know the impact of. Max’s account intensifies the dilemma. He stresses that if a person changes and becomes “old and dull”, it is probably not good for the child. Why is it not good for the child? And why is a person who changes depicted as old and dull? Why is old used as a denigrating term that is connected to dull? Could it be that old, when used like this, connotes the domestic sphere, immobility and seclusion, characteristics that are not praised in a society where high status is engendered through public accomplishments, flexibility and mobility (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002; Hays 1996; Hockey and James 1993; Lee 2005).

Change is equated with an increasing orientation away from the public arena and towards the domestic, and the domestic connotes dependence rather than independence. I propose that this is why change is depicted dismissively. In two groups consisting of first-time parents, the discussions on change proceeded as follows, resembling what has been shown above.

Vendela: I guess I wanted to be like before.

Jennifer: Yes, I hoped to be like before and I hope I am as well.

Agneta: Yes exactly.

Jennifer: Yes because I have friends who have totally changed. They become so much mum and dad that, yes you don’t communicate any longer when you talk. And I don’t want to become like that. Because I, I hope that I haven’t become like that. Because I think ugh that you can become so yes changed when you have children. Ugh, that you are not yourself anymore and become someone else. (Vendela 39, Jennifer 36, Agneta 29, parents, FG4)

The self, as it is pictured when focus group participants reject change is a consistent one, as this interview passage shows. That is, a person is pictured to have a self, a core personality, and any changes in this personality are ‘not natural’; a person is ‘not herself anymore but has

become someone else'. But it is not change *per se* that is rejected; it is a change from a public, neo-liberal self towards a more domestic and immobile self. Change is affirmed rather than rejected when referred to as a self-fulfilling venture leading to new experiences, as was shown in the previous chapter exploring the discourse on parenthood and notions of the value of having a child. Parenthood is talked about as a self-developing life with possibilities that enable new social contacts and activities, as shown in other studies in Western cultures, such as Bailey (1999) and Sevón (2005). The recurrent opposition to a 'domestic self' is illustrated further in the following dialogue:

Michael: We said before, we talked about not becoming any complicated parents who can't partake in things and only sit at home and become inhibited and lose all your friends sort of, so we have said that we will try to live exactly like before.

Angelina: Yes

Caroline: But that's what we have said as well that

Michael: yes and that's what I think makes you feel the best

Caroline: Because you, you sort of had friends, before, before you had children yourself, and you thought like but they never partake in anything and, and I know that you sort of said that we are not going to be like that. You have to be able to go to a party sort of, even though you have children. (Michael 28, Angelina 32, Caroline 29, parents, FG2)

By now, we recognize the reasoning in the above quote. The participants refer to friends who as parents "never partake in anything", who are "inhibited" and "only sit at home". The ideal implied in the discourse on continuity is that a person is outgoing, flexible, and socializes just as s/he did before entering parenthood.

### *In the best interest of the child*

Concurrently with maintaining the public self after entering parenthood being emphasized as the ideal, it is also brought up that an unchanged lifestyle may be difficult to manage, as notions of what is best for the child must be regarded. In the data, women in particular are those who bring this up as a big concern, although it is also implied by men, such as by Glen

above (24, FG7). The quote of Amanda signifies the ambivalence focusing on the child and focusing on oneself may cause. Amanda is childless, but her reasoning exemplifies a dilemma that is evident throughout the focus group discussion, in the positioning of parents as well as childless adults.

Amanda: It'd be like a failure, I feel today, if I only spent time with other mums, and if I'd lose what I've got. I think it's quite important to hold on to your own interests, your old friends - a child mustn't come between our friendship - and to be able to go out to a pub, to work and to continue with that, not having to sacrifice your career (...) At the same time, I believe it's really hard to combine this, because you don't want your friends partying having a negative impact on your child's well-being. So some sort of change, but there's a fear of becoming dull, just staying at home. (...) I have some sort of dream that it's going to be possible to combine in some perfect way. That you are the person you were before and still a great person for your child (31, FG3).

Once more, we see an example of a participant who affirms continuity and more importantly the public, self-fulfilling self. "It'd be like a failure, I feel today, if I only spent time with other mums, and if I'd lose what I've got. I think it is quite important to hold on to your own interests, your old friends - a child mustn't come between our friendship - and to be able to go out to a pub, to work and to continue with that, not having to sacrifice your career", Amanda states. The general positioning in the data causes me to propose that social status and (self-) respect are engendered through depicting oneself as mobile, flexible, active and outgoing.

A contemporary Western person does not gain social value exclusively from being a parent, as Jensen (1995, 1996) has suggested. But Amanda's positioning also illustrates a pertinent dilemma that appears in the data: it may be difficult to continue life and concurrently act in accordance with notions of what is best for the child. Responsible parenting does not connote recurrent partying, for instance, and this is what is commonly referred to as a required change – to decrease the amount of time spent at pubs and clubs. But one participant, Mona (24, FG5), has a more radical way of picturing good parenthood. Mona is the only one who states that she may choose never to become a parent, and her positioning in regard to the discourse on change may be a way to justify this. She stresses that a radical lifestyle change would be required of her, would she become

a mother, because she believes that a child should be cared for in the home; paid work and parenthood are not auspiciously combined in this regard.

Mona is exceptional in her challenge of daycare, but she draws on a current notion in the Swedish context, the one that parental homecare is preferable for young children. The affirmation of homecare, however, in practice mostly leads to parents extending the period of parental leave by six months or so, and to the mother, upon returning to work, using her legal right to work part time to reduce the hours of daycare (Bekkengen 2002; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Halldén 1991; Kugelberg 1999; Statistics Sweden 2003c). The question of whether parenthood should mean one of the parents quitting working, in order to care for the child in the home rather than using daycare facilities, is not discussed in the focus groups, which can be regarded as a reflection of the assumption – taken for granted in Sweden – that both parents will return to work after paid parental leave. Mona is an exception in that she promotes care in the home as being what is best for the child, while also emphasizing financial independence and time for education, work and leisure.

Disa: Having children is that demanding, is that what you think, having children?

Mona: Yes, it has to be demanding. Like, I think it's the most important thing there is, being able to give the children time and commitment, and you can't if you work all the time (...). It's really important that you are able to give the child this security, and to play with them and to be with them and it has to take time. (...) If I had children I wouldn't like to have them at a daycare centre, for instance, and then it's, then you have to stay at home. I would never leave my children at a daycare centre so then, really, you have to stay at home and then you can't have a career. (24, FG5)

Mona states elsewhere in the interview that the transition to parenthood is not a natural step; education, career and financial independence are essential to her. The ideals directing her life, as she portrays it, appear difficult to combine, and her argument concerning what she feels is best for a child could serve to justify her account that she may not wish to enter parenthood. "I think it's the most important thing there is, being able to give the children time and commitment, and you can't if you work all the time", Mona says. Parenthood and a good childhood, as she pictures it, require the "time and commitment" of the parents; the 'intensive

mothering' (Hays 1996) that Mona affirms contradicts her career ambitions. Another interesting aspect with regard to Mona's account above is that neither she nor any of her fellow group members suggest that the partner (father) could be the one to stay home and care for a potential child, in this way solving Mona's dilemma of choosing between parenthood and career. This supports research stressing that gender equality in reality means women orienting themselves more and more towards traditional male values (such as career, time of one's own, financial independence), rather than men orientating themselves more towards the domestic sphere (Bekkengen 2002; Bergman and Hobson 2002; Drew 1998; Haas and Hwang 2007; Holmberg 1993; Hochschild 1989). Public accomplishments and selves are given precedence over domestic duties and unpaid care work.

## **Positioned to change and experiencing change**

It is common for focus group participants to exemplify how other people practice parenthood and to dismiss and applaud these different examples. They are 'doing difference' (Mauthner and Hey 1999) and ascribing certain positions certain values, explicitly and implicitly in the focus group discussions. The negotiation over right and wrong, good and bad, normal and abnormal is hereby made evident. In groups consisting of first-time parents, the participants reflect over their own experiences of parenthood and whether they have changed or not. All parents argue that parenthood has changed them. They draw on the notion that parenthood automatically engenders change in desires and priorities, but the majority also affirm the notion of continuity and picture the aim to be to combine the lifestyle they had prior to parenthood with good parenting, and to make necessary changes in order to accomplish this.

### ***Positioned to change***

People position themselves and others by their positioning. In one focus group containing parents (FG4), the participants talked about being

perceived differently by friends and acquaintances as pregnant and parent. They commented on other people seemingly expecting them to turn into dull, proper people, behaving more like adults and talking about nothing but the child. The participants reject this image and affirm the continuity ideal, that is, they refute the positioning of themselves as changed. But they embrace change as well. Anita says:

Anita: Well, now it wasn't so long ago I had a child and I was pregnant, but you feel it when there are parties and such festivities and it's not the ones who usually ask if you want to come, they don't ask you any longer, sort of. It may have been because you were pregnant and then it may not be really appropriate but, but still. Yes, that's how it turns out I guess. I don't know. It's something from both directions I guess.

Agneta: Yes, I believe that you yourself become a bit like that as well.  
Anita: yes. That you may not get as much out of it anymore, to do the things you did before. You prioritize other things instead. And then you may sort out some friends who you, I don't know. (Anita 27, Agneta 29, parents, FG4)

Anita has a baby of three weeks at the time of the interview, but she talks about having experienced that friends started to relate to her differently when they got to know she was pregnant. Anita disapproves of the positioning of her as changed (and the consequence of this) when she says, "It may have been because you were pregnant and then it may not be really appropriate but, but still". But her positioning wavers in the affirmative towards a changed self. She draws the conclusion that perhaps it is not only friends who act differently towards her, but maybe she has new preferences as well, and Agneta supports this idea. However, positioning oneself as changed, in this situation, could be interpreted as a strategy to keep control over one's life. By referring to herself as changed, Anita portrays herself as the one who actually decides how and with whom she wishes to socialize, rather than somebody dependent on the initiative of friends. She 'performs independence' (Lee 2005) and control in this regard. But to appropriate the notion of oneself as changed in this respect appears problematic; Anita does not acclaim the idea fully, which her referral to a conversation with a friend soon after the delivery illustrates, in another part of the interview. Anita refutes the friend's exclamation that Anita did not appear to have changed, and states, "Like, I'm the same person even

though I've had a child. I don't know what she thought I'd turn into".

The wavering characteristic of Anita's positioning corresponds with most of the other parents. But the two positions are not necessarily contradictory. The participants talk about parenthood resulting in positive changes in themselves, but they disapprovingly refer to parents who 'complicate' their lives and change their everyday activities 'too much'. In one group (FG2), particular emphasis is put on not letting the child restrict you. The participants refer to friends and acquaintances who commented positively on them taking the child along or having organized with a babysitter to be able to join social arrangements. Their ambition to live as before has been socially approved. The content of the focus group discussions is: to change in oneself is appropriate and positively looked upon, but to radically change one's way of living is not approved. The 'logic' appears to be that lifestyle and practices, a public self, should be maintained, while a person may talk about having changed in regard to inner experiences and feelings.

### *Experiencing change*

However, there is one parent in the focus group data who talks about the transition to parenthood as a total change of life, and that is Dan (FG8), married and father of a child of 20 months. Dan is the only person (out of 12 parents) who does not refer to the discourse on continuity, although Eva, in the group he is in, does. About becoming a parent Dan says:

Dan: It has been a big change, that's fair to say. You've been talking about that earlier [referring to the other participant], about not being able to rule your own time, world, at all. For our part I believe it's become very much, there has been a strong projection on the child instead, so I feel that you've broken quite totally with your previous life to focus more or less 100 percent on the child. It's a bit like this, not that it has become a project, but it has really been centred on, yes 95 percent of what we talk about is the child. (36, parent, FG8)

Dan's positioning is interesting in that he does not try to justify his changed life, and he does not in any way affirm or oppose the discourse on continuity, which are common ways of relating to change in the data. Dan talks about the change that parenthood has entailed as a matter of fact;

however, through his positioning, he challenges the ideal of continuity, that is, the ideal of trying to live as before, of protecting ‘one’s own time’ and maintaining friends and leisure time activities. Dan talks about him and his partner being absorbed by the child and “to have broken quite totally with your previous life”. A bit later on in the interview Dan refers to his childless friends and says:

Dan: It’s extremely hard to stick to the previous life with your friends, so to speak, with what having a family entails. So, in the end you part in different directions, that’s what happens. It’s really hard to socialize being in such different situations, actually. (36, parent, FG8)

While other parents and not yet parents recurrently stress the importance of staying in contact with old friends when entering parenthood, Dan does not: “you part in different directions” he concludes, “that’s what happens”.

In the interview, Dan compares his life prior to parenthood and the life he lives as a parent. Life prior to parenthood was a life that besides work was filled with socializing in restaurants, pubs and clubs; he was never home Friday and Saturday nights, he states. Eva (38, parent), the other participant in the interview, pictures her life before parenthood much as Dan does – her main leisure time activity was spending time with friends out in town. Eva, however, refers to continuity in the affirmative, and tries to justify the changes parenthood has entailed. When Dan talks about a total change in life, she states that it has been a good change, a self-fulfilling venture characterized by personal development, and she refutes Dan’s positioning of life as radically changed – she pictures herself as trying to live as much as possible as before having the child, although in a slightly modified way. Friends without children can be kept, but the terms of socializing may change a little, she states. And pubs, restaurants and movie theatres can be visited in the daytime rather than in the evenings. When Eva talks about life as changed, she draws mainly on some sort of inner, personal aspect of change, in line with most other focus group participants.

Dan talks about a total change of life and Eva refers to how unexpected the ensued change was. This is in contrast with how the transition to parenthood is portrayed in the other two focus groups consisting of first-time parents (FG2, FG4). The participants in those

groups talk about parenthood as easier than expected. There are several tentative explanations to propose in regard to this difference. One is that Dan and Eva have older children than the parents in the other groups, and for this reason may have more experiences of being restricted by parenthood. Another possible reason crystallizes when we take a closer look at the focus group participants' talk about leisure time activities, and by considering notions of what good parenting implies. The participants in the other groups (FG2, FG4) talk about nightlife before parenthood, but not with the same emphasis as Eva and Dan. Instead they refer to a range of other leisure activities as being important, such as travel, boating, motor biking, and horses. I would suggest that these interests are easier to combine with notions of good parenting. You can bring the child along on the trip and the boat, to the stable and to gatherings with other bikers without risking being looked upon as irresponsible. But when one's main interest is in visiting restaurants and clubs and in having an active nightlife, a radical change is required. It is not a life that requires a change in itself. It does so because in Swedish society, mirrored by accounts in the focus group data, it is not regarded as proper parenthood to bring the children along to restaurants, pubs, clubs and parties with lots of drinking.

A third issue to consider is the dual-earner, dual-carer family ideal, containing the image of an involved father (Bergman and Hobson 2002; Björnberg 2002). Good fatherhood means engaging in and spending time with the child, not leaving the minding to the mother or to some other person so that regular nightlife activities can be maintained. Men do differ in their preferences and in their positioning towards the dual-earner, dual-carer image, but Dan affirms the gender equality ideal in the interview. He talks about it being important for him to try to equally divide the care of the child with his partner, and to be a committed, involved father who spends a great deal of time with the child. For him, to engage in this position, a rejection of the continuity ideal appears to be required.

## Discussion

### *Notions of change*

Notions of self are connected to notions of social status and value. That is, people's subjectivities are constructed in relation to ideas of what engenders social respect and constitutes a good life. Lee (2005: 38) argued that "Western performances of personhood are shaped by an ideal of separateness". Being and becoming an adult constitute performing separation and independence, "and this cultural tendency to give high status to those able to sustain a performance of separateness, be it financial, emotional, cognitive or attitudinal performance, means that today's adult individuals often find themselves working towards or desirous of such independence" (Lee 2005: 38). This and previous chapters support Lee's emphasis on the ideal of performing separateness. This ideal is explicitly and implicitly drawn upon in the focus group participants' positioning; it is challenged but more frequently affirmed. The ideal of independence concurs with the neo-liberal self; I see them as constituting parts of the individualization discourse.

Previous research in the Western world and Sweden has shown that parenthood, and motherhood in particular, connotes dependence and self-sacrificing which contradicts the aim of independence and self-fulfilment (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002; Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Hays 1996; Stoppard 2000). This creates dilemmas and ambivalence, as indicated in the present work. In my data, the predominating affirmative position is that a man as well as a woman continues to care also for herself/himself after having entered parenthood. That is, the recurrent ideal depicted is that life should not change radically; friends, hobbies and time of one's own should be prioritized as well as the child. There is, however, an underlying insecurity as to whether this will be accomplishable. The participants who most firmly embrace the continuity ideal – that is, to maintain one's public life also after entering parenthood – are also those who express concerns about, as a parent, not having time for leisure activities. They talk the most about risks and insecurity in relation to what parenthood could imply, and refer to the uncertainty as a reason for deferring parenthood. These participants also draw on the notion that parenthood naturally changes a person's desires, but they talk about the

uncertainty of not knowing for sure: Maybe parenthood will come across as restrictive after all. A few participants reject the continuity ideal and embrace parenthood as an opportunity for change. Some of these participants talk about parenthood as entering a new phase that entails a change of life and a change of self; they refute the ambition to continue life as it was prior to parenthood. Several of them refer to notions of good parenting when doing this; a child should not be brought along to pubs and clubs, it is argued.

The dual-earner family ideal that most Swedish families are organized around appears as a taken-for-granted notion in the focus group discussions. Work is seldom brought up when possible lifestyle changes are discussed – it is taken for granted for most to continue work in the paid labour force also after having a child. One participant, however, challenges this otherwise outspoken understanding. She argues that to her, good parenthood is impossible to accomplish when both parents are engaged in paid work. Her position is a rather radical version of the homecare ideal found in other Swedish studies (Bekkengen 2002; Halldén 1991; Kugelberg 1999). For her, the consequence is that she may never decide to enter parenthood – financial independence and work are of greater importance. She does not solve her dilemma by referring to the dual-carer ideal and the new father image, and no indications of why are given. Perhaps this is because the father as the main carer is still a rather uncommon, unconventional image. Perhaps her hesitation towards parenthood made sense by her positioning of parenthood and work as impossible to combine.

### *The public self*

Previous studies in Sweden and the Western world suggest that men and women form their sense of self on the basis of leisure time, work and education rather than on activities connected to the domestic sphere (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Brembeck, 2003; Haas and Hwang 2007; Hoschchild 1997; Jensen 1995). The high status ascribed to being a flexible, outgoing person evolved parallel with contemporary capitalism (Bäck-Wiklund 2003; Lee 2001; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002), and the high status self can be depicted as a neo-liberal self (Davis et al. 2006) and, as I propose, a public self.

The public self is evident in the focus group participants' references to the discourse on change and in their construction of self, and this has certain implications for images of parenthood. A predominating positioning is that what is opposite to flexibility and mobility is devalued and connected to old age and dullness, supporting Hockey and James' (1993) explication. But change is also referred to in the affirmative, in a way that does not contrast to the public, neo-liberal self. As the previous chapter showed, parenthood is depicted as entailing positive changes in terms of new experiences and self-fulfilling ventures. 'Inner' changes of a person are affirmed in this respect, while extensive lifestyle changes often are disapproved.

The position most affirmed by the focus group participants is one in which the parent continues to have time for her-/himself, not only in terms of work, but also in terms of a self-fulfilling leisure time. The emphasis on time for oneself and public activities indicates the supremacy of the public self. However, it may be an ideal that is hard for parents to practice and unattractive to appropriate. The focus group participants have little or no experience of being parents but other studies have shown that notions of caring for oneself and of caring for the child are difficult to combine in a desirable way, in Sweden as well as in other Western countries, particularly for women (Bekkengen 2002; Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Hays 1996; Kugelberg 1999; Stoppard 2000). The notion of what good parenting implies, the ideology of intensive mothering (Hays 1996) and the child as project (Halldén 1991) appear to take some precedence over the notion of having a life of one's own when parenthood is practiced (Forsberg 2007b). This does not indicate that the ideal of caring for oneself peters out after entering parenthood, but it does mean that it may be hard to fulfil.

Ambivalence towards change and the uncertainties of parenthood are prevalent also in other societal contexts (see Bailey 1999; Sevón 2005). In one British study, many women drew on the discourse on continuity and rejected connecting motherhood with a changed self, but concurrently described parenthood as an excuse for certain lifestyle and character changes. But "(i)n describing themselves as 'excused', there was an implication of failure. The person who is 'excused' feels a delight in escaping – but mixed with the delight may be shame" (Bailey 1999: 350). Bailey's study contained middle class women with a flourishing career.

The women rejected having changed radically due to pregnancy and the choice to become parents, and they portrayed parenthood much in accordance with how change was depicted positively by the participants in my study, as a progression and yet another self-fulfilling experience.

## 9

# Concluding discussion

## **A qualitative study of reproductive decision-making**

How do Swedish young adults picture parenthood and the timing of parenthood? How is parenthood depicted in comparison to a childless life? What is the value of having a child and of becoming a parent?

The present work will hopefully have caused many readers to reflect over the timing of parenthood, the childless life compared to life as a parent, and the ideal life and self. The reader may be familiar with some of the notions and ideas raised in the data, and less so with others, but I believe it would be hard for any young Swedish adult, from 20 to 40 years of age, to totally dismiss the reasoning about reproductive decision-making that has been raised in the present study. The varying composition of focus group participants, in terms of background and experiences, has engendered comparatively rich data on discourses and positions to draw upon, refute, embrace, negotiate and reinterpret. The analysis points at a range of available positions in relation to a range of available discourses – to agency and subjectivities in relation to discursive structures. Additionally, the present work, as few other studies on reproductive decision-making have done, points at the complexity imbued in the decision. Most researchers on procreative behaviour affirm the intricacies of the matter, but it is less common to illuminate the complexity in empirical analyses. This, I would argue, is one of the strengths with the present work.

## *Discourse and conduct*

The main focus of the research project 'Family and working life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century' is to study values and ideals concerning parenthood and family formation (Bernhardt 2002). Bernhardt's quantitative study includes conduct, but the empirical analysis of the present work is dedicated to values and ideals. It is a discourse analysis devoted to the study of talk. My theoretical perspective, based on social constructionist and poststructuralist perspectives, contains a view on discourse as constituting practice, in accordance with, for instance, Foucault (1978). Language is seen as the primary object of study because language is believed to construct thought, and understandings of the world are seen as being constructed and reconstructed in people's interaction and talk. Freeman summed up this approach nicely when he said that "in telling your own story, you can only work with what is available, in the way of words, genres, storylines, and so on. There is no other way, no other means of capturing the 'really real', outside of language and culture, simply because the 'really real', in all of its multiplicity and changeability, is constituted as such inside language and culture" (Freeman 1993: 79, emphasis in original). This applies to the researcher as well as to participants in a given study. The language that constitutes her/him, regardless of whether s/he studies talk or conduct, forms her/his interpretations and presentations.

There is a difference between talk and conduct. Official statistics, for instance, inform us about how people generally behave, but not about why. The 'why' is for us to reason about using the means, the discourses, we have and position our selves in relation to. And this is what is done in the focus group interviews conducted for and presented in the present work; the participants try to explain and attach reason to the behaviour of others and themselves; they try to understand and present feasible explanations for the general postponement of parenthood, and in doing so they draw on experiences they have gained culturally, socially and individually. In this way, the reasoning in the focus group discussions becomes part of a wider cultural collective of similar experiences and lives. Thus, according to my theoretical approach, the ideas and ideals presented by the focus group participants have relevance also outside the focus group context.

The world is understood through discourse, but, as I see it, the

world and the lives of people cannot be reduced to solely a matter of discourse. Stoppard (2000) argued for a 'material-discursive' approach including discursive and material structures, and I find this approach attractive. The discourse on (good) parenthood, for instance, affects people's ideas about parenthood as well as their conduct, but material conditions facilitate and restrain parenthood as well, differently for different individuals and groups of people. Material-discursive conditions intertwine and work in a dynamic and changeable way through negotiations, resistance and reconstructions. As I see it, the focus group positioning in the data is formed by discursive and material conditions and by ideals as well as conduct. The participants interpret their own conduct and that of others, and they reason and position themselves in relation to it, influenced by different discourses and ideals. They interpret material conditions through available discourses, but the co-construction of and positioning in relation to different discourses are also influenced by the material world as it is experienced.

### *Understanding and rewriting the self*

In accordance with the poststructuralist-inspired theorists who have influenced me, the subject, the self, a person's identity and subjectivity are looked upon as unfixated, multiple, and contradictory (see e.g. Davies and Harré 1990; Davies 2004; Hollway 1989; Potter and Wetherell 1987; Weedon 1987). The unfixated, precarious nature of the subject is mirrored in the continuous reflection over and rewriting of the self. In their talk and positioning, people (unconsciously and consciously) try to grasp who they are and the logics of their reasoning and behaviour (Freeman 1993; see also Weedon 1987). This became clear in the analysis of the present data. The focus group discussions support the notion of the self as unfixated, incoherent, and contradictory; a variety of ideals and ideas influence the participants and cause them to waver in their positioning and in their portrayal of who they are and why they act and have acted as they do. The focus group participants often reflected more or less explicitly over their positioning, and tried to justify it by referring to different reasons for a certain position. They tried to understand themselves, who they are, and why they take the position they do, through the process.

In the data analysis I have followed individual narration and subject

positioning throughout the interviews so as to better understand individual positioning. Although people are complex, they are to some extent also consistent in which subject positions they draw upon and affirm and oppose; the individual has certain attributes and experiences (of being a man, woman, at a certain age, with a certain appearance, from growing up with a certain social and ethnic background, etcetera) that form her/his subjectivity (Frosh et al. 2003; Hollway and Jefferson 2000; Hollway 1989; Weedon 1987). For example, some focus group participants continuously referred to the risk of relationship dissolution in the discussions about the timing of parenthood. Other individuals also referred to this risk, but not as frequently and not with such emphasis and concern. Several of the participants who stressed the risk of union dissolution brought up their own experiences of growing up in broken homes. Individual experiences form subjectivities, and additionally, the narrative, as Freeman (1993) has suggested, becomes a recollection of the past that is told in relation to the present and the future. A person portrays her-/himself through narration, and uses the positioning, and her/his experiences, to make sense of her-/himself and her/his life as it is lived at the moment. In this way, the subject's positioning is a process of understanding and rewriting the self.

## **Timing parenthood and ideals of life**

In what ways are the timing of parenthood talked about in the focus group data? How are the ideal life course, the ideal life, and the ideal self depicted? How are good parenthood and the auspicious childhood defined? These questions have been possible to scrutinize by looking at individual and general positionings, and the focus group method has proven very fruitful for doing so.

As has been mentioned previously, the present study is part of a larger research project consisting of a quantitative and qualitative component. Bernhardt's quantitative investigation includes an exploration of how values and attitudes towards family formation appear to be connected to actual reproductive behaviour (Bernhardt 2002; Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006). A summary of Bernhardt's findings indicates that the preconditions for entering parenthood that Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995)

enumerated are relevant for most Swedish young adults. That is, stable income, stable relationship, completed education and proper accommodation are variables that people generally consider to be important criteria. But Bernhardt's study also shows that accomplishment of these criteria does not necessarily result in a desire to enter parenthood. Respondents at the age of 30 who had not yet entered parenthood commonly explained this with 'I have not desired children yet' and 'I have wanted to do other things first'. Bernhardt suggested that the notion of when a person is at the right age to enter parenthood has changed, and that this may be affecting the timing of parenthood, concurrently with there being more open attitudes towards different ways of living. Additionally, the 'right' age to enter parenthood appears to be around 30 today, rather than 20 to 25 as it was in the 1970s (Bernhardt 2000a, 2000b).

In 2003, Bernhardt conducted the follow-up study and approximately 1750 responded in the second round; the respondents were born 1968, 1972 and 1976. Only a small number of childless men and women thought that parenthood would cause restraints on their private economy. A larger percentage, 50 percent of the childless men and 37 percent of the childless women, thought that having a child would restrict their mobility and freedom to do the things they wanted to do. Bernhardt's study shows that the men and women who were most prone to connect parenthood with negative implications in the 1999 survey were less likely to have entered parenthood at the second round of the survey in 2003. The study also shows that men who described themselves as having gender equal values had entered parenthood to a lesser degree than had men who referred to themselves as being rather traditional in their view on family life (Bernhardt and Goldscheider 2006; Bernhardt 2004).

The findings from Bernhardt's survey data have similarities with the focus group discussions presented here. That is, the timing of parenthood is depicted as being dependent on having accomplished many things prior to having a child, on having appropriated a feeling of readiness and maturity as well as somewhat stable material conditions, on having found the right partner, and on being of a suitable age. Parenthood is connected to lifestyle restraints, but it is also referred to as something that adds additional meaning to life. The findings resulting from the focus group data and discourse analysis complement the longitudinal quantitative study by pointing at the complexities involved in reproductive decision-

making and to the contradictory ideals imbued in the decision and in the lives of contemporary people.

A range of discourses was detected in my categorization and analysis of the focus group data. When the participants were discussing the timing and value of parenthood, they draw on discourses on kin, friendship, the family, the romantic relationship, change and continuity, individualization, biology, age, extrinsic circumstances and intrinsic conditions, and (good) parenthood. These discourses constitute the themes apparent in the work, such as the ideal life course; being ready, mature and secure; love and family; strains and gains; body aspects; family and social network; and motherhood and fatherhood. The discourses intertwine; components in one discourse may be evident also in others, and the sum of the discourses makes evident certain ideals, some of which are more prominent than others. Thus, the analysis of talk about the timing of parenthood has provided us with an explication of ideas and ideals concerning how life should be lived, the good parent, the good childhood, and the normal, respectable person. Additionally, it illuminates the potential of a certain discourse – that is, discourses are used differently and elements of a discourse are used to serve different purposes.

### ***Individualization and the public self***

#### ***Independence and self-fulfilment***

One argument, that life should be filled with proceeding self-fulfilment, which is part of what I call the individualization discourse, is referred to both as a justification for postponing parenthood and as a justification for entering parenthood, in the focus group data. This, to me, indicates that this line of argumentation is a predominating notion affecting people's subjectivities and ways of understanding the world. The individualization discourse is prominent in the data in that components of it are found in other discourses and the ideal that it contains is affirmed and challenged in ways that support its supremacy.

The individualization discourse contains notions of self-fulfilment, independence and freedom, recurring words in the focus group discussions. I have chosen to call this configuration of ideas the individualization discourse for two reasons. One is that self-fulfilment, independence and freedom are connected to individual desires and accomplishments. Maturity

and self-knowledge are gained from an extensive period of being able to focus primarily on oneself, the participants commonly argue. It is also common to refer to the decision to enter parenthood as an individual choice, based on an inner desire, rather than as something that is affected by extrinsic circumstances (although the opposite position also is taken). The second reason for me calling it the individualization discourse is that the focus group positioning is in good accordance with sociological theorizing on characteristics of contemporary Western societies, much of which is built around the term individualization. Beck and Beck-Gernsheim (1995, 2002), for instance, suggested that individualization is the idea of the person as independent and rational, seeking self-fulfilment through the labour market and the public sphere. Contemporary individualization is characterized by an increasing demand on, as well as opportunity for, people to live 'a life of their own'. Old obligations and responsibilities towards family, relatives, community and nation have decreased, while responsibility towards oneself and one's own self-fulfilment has become primary.

The notion of the independent, self-fulfilling individual is an ideal that correlates with an economic and political climate that promotes individual 'freedom' and requires flexibility and mobility of people, which in turn makes it harder for intimate relationships to be sustained (Bauman 2003; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995). In addition, it is suggested that individualization causes people to look for answers within themselves rather than to look at how the societal system creates the opportunities and restraints that form our lives. Individualization is a product of the neo-liberal ideology that pictures the individual as the master of her/his own biography (Nilsen and Brannen 2002).

The findings from the focus group discussions support sociological theories on individualization. Individual freedom, self-fulfilment and time of one's own are recurrently brought up as important ingredients in the ideal life. The participants emphasize independence and individual freedom when they talk about the pros and cons of parenthood, the ideal life course, the ideal romantic relationship, and aspects influencing the timing of parenthood. Normal young adulthood and normal desires (and selves), as they are pictured in the data, are predominantly connected with activities such as education, work, travel, clubbing, socializing, training, and dating. These are recurrently pictured as self-fulfilling ventures, and as activities

included in the ideal life that engenders personal growth. It is interesting to note that leisure time activities are recurrently referred to as being equally important as work and education. The focus group participants refer to 'having lived life' as a requirement to engender maturity and readiness for parenthood – the feeling of being mature is thus connected to 'having done other things first', although the feeling of maturity may fail to appear also in cases when 'life has been lived' for quite an extensive period of time. A dominant image that comes across in the participants' argumentation and positioning is the importance of 'performing independence' (Lee 2001), and independence is connected to public activities such as work, education, travel, clubbing, and socializing. The ideal self, as it is superiorly pictured, is a public, independent self.

### *Change, continuity and uncertainty*

The childless life is connected to having obligations only to oneself, that is, of being free to do what one pleases. The focus group participants use phrases such as 'living life' and to 'experience oneself' when referring to this kind of life. Parenthood, on the contrary, is not connected to 'living life' and to individual freedom. Parenthood is connected to having responsibilities towards other individuals, to the child and, as a parent, to extending responsibilities towards one's partner. This new responsibility requires another way of living and prioritizing, but to what extent is uncertain.

The present data reveal the many risks and uncertainties connected to parenthood. How would parenthood impact on life? How would it impact on my individual freedom and independence? There is a taken for granted notion that parenthood will change life, but to what extent? That is uncertain, and this uncertainty appears problematic for many. Will I enjoy life as a parent, participants ask. Or will I find it restricting? Will I have the energy to endure the implications of parenthood, such as a screaming child and less time for my partner, my friends and myself? Will I have the energy and time to practice good, committed parenthood? One risk of family formation and accomplishing the ideal of having a child with a romantic partner is becoming dependent on this partner, and being prone to practice responsible parenthood and thus losing some of one's freedom. There is

also the risk of not being able to be the good parent one wishes to be due to, for example, divorce and separation, unemployment, and a demanding job.

Many participants refer to concerns of this sort when they try to understand their deferral of parenthood, but others take a more pragmatic approach to the unpredictable outcomes of the transition. Those less concerned embrace the notion of change differently than do those who recurrently refer to risks. The change in life that having a child causes and what this change could entail are embraced and rejected in the data, differently by different individuals. Some individuals refer to change mostly in positive terms, others waver in their positioning and still others affirm the continuity ideal. But change and continuity have various definitions. Change is talked about as an inner change, a change of loving a new person and experiencing new, inner, sides of oneself. It is also referred to as a change in priorities and lifestyle, and these definitions are often, but not always, intertwined. The inner change is talked about as automatically engendering lifestyle changes in the best interest of the child.

However, the notion that life should change radically when parenthood is entered into is predominantly refuted. As I understand it, the ideal of continuity is connected to the notion (of continuing) to focus on oneself, that is, to the individualization discourse. But why, I must ask, is change so often related to risk and restraint in the focus group discussions? It has to be noted that, in Sweden, almost all parents return to paid labour within 18 months after a child is born, so although parenthood may be connected with the risk of change and used as an excuse to change, for Swedish parents (in general) life is maintained to quite a great extent and the public self is possible to maintain, comparatively speaking. Giddens (1991: 111) argued that a desire and striving to 'colonize the future' saturates contemporary lives. In order to predict the outcomes of one's decisions, individuals engage in constant reflection over future scenarios and try to predict and direct them. The focus group data epitomizes this aim to colonize the future. Risks of different sorts are raised and possible outcomes of parenthood reflected over, and the focus group participants solve different dilemmas of the uncertainty in varying ways. It is easy to understand why the picture of a settled, comparatively stable life is attractive in a society where risks of different kinds alarm and cause concerns (Beck 1992; Caplan 2000), and where in practice contemporary

adulthood is equivalent to flexibility and uncertainty rather than to stability (Lee 2001). An additional reason for the participants' reflection over risks may be that the responsible, moral adult and parent is performed and made normal in this way. Calculating and planning ahead is what signifies responsible, adult behaviour and the normal, adult self. This may be why the costs and risks of parenthood imbue the focus group discussions to a far greater extent than the possible benefits do.

### ***Standard parenthood, standard lives***

#### *Standard parenthood*

Perhaps notions of good parenthood and the auspicious childhood are part of the explanation of the focus group positioning towards change? Living a comparatively 'settled' life means being ready and secure enough to enter parenthood. Responsible and preferable parenthood, as it is pictured in the focus group data, is closely connected to the standard adulthood model (Lee 2001). This model includes stable income, stable accommodation, and a stable romantic relationship. It is argued in the focus groups that this kind of settled life offers the best preconditions for good parenthood and for enduring the strains parenthood may entail. Hobcraft and Kiernan (1995) suggested the following preconditions for young Europeans to enter parenthood: attained education, stable income, satisfying accommodation and a stable relationship. Although the focus group reasoning is partly in accordance with Hobcraft and Kiernan's suggestion, criteria for entering parenthood are far from set. The data illuminate individual preferences as well as the complex positioning towards meanings of a settled life and material conditions required for entering parenthood. A recurring position is to oppose material preconditions as being essential for taking the decision to try for a child. The participants refer to the social welfare system as being a security blanket in cases of unsure or small income, and they draw on the experiences of friends who have entered parenthood living in less settled circumstances and still managed fine. The ways of entering parenthood are many, although the preferable approach is to have a somewhat stable life. For some, stable and settled mean living in a house, for others it means being as certain as possible that the romantic relationship is going to last. The overall recurring definition of settled in the data is 'having done other things first' and having found the proper

romantic partner for parenthood, although these notions are also negotiated and opposed by some.

The focus group positioning towards standard parenthood is ambivalent. Although connected to financial independence and security, the 'settled life' is also related to immobility, restrictions, and being 'tied down'. Additionally, it may be hard and it may take time to fulfil the criteria of the standard parenthood/adulthood model, as the present focus group data and other studies have indicated (see e.g. Brannen et al. 2002; Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995). And when accomplished, it may be difficult to sustain.

### *Intensive parenting and the child as project*

Previous studies in the Western world and in Sweden have shown that many working parents, particularly mothers, find the aim of focusing on oneself and focusing on the child difficult to unite (e.g. Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997; Elvin-Nowak 1999; Hays 1996). The ideal of the public, independent self is not easily accomplished at the same time as the ideal of the good parent. Hays (1996) referred to the phenomenon as "the cultural contradictions of motherhood". She argued that good parenthood in contemporary times is 'intensive'; it has come to entail more time, energy and capital consuming in parallel with the increasingly predominate 'ideology of the labour market', as Hays put it. That is, more and more is demanded of parents, while at the same time less and less time and energy are left when men and women, fathers and mothers, have entered the paid labour force in equal numbers and self-fulfilment is believed to be primarily accomplished through public activities and less through domestic duties, including minding one's own children.

When the focus group participants in the present study discuss parenthood contra a childless life and the timing of parenthood, they refer to components included in the discourse on (good) parenthood and the individualization discourse. Many focus group participants talk about the risk of becoming 'dull' and 'inhibited' upon entering parenthood. Maintaining life and a public self is recurrently referred to as the ideal. At the same time, parenthood is connected to 'another sort of responsibility' – a life where minding and caring for the child takes time and energy and the

best interest of the child has to be prioritized. How the ‘cultural contradictions of parenthood’ (Hays 1996) are to be satisfactorily merged is uncertain, and many refer to this as an inherent risk of entering parenthood. Other participants, however, refer to change in the affirmative and challenge the continuity ideal. This is, however, a moderate refutation, as has been suggested above. Continuing paid work after the parental leave period is taken for granted and possible to accomplish due to the subsidized, available and income-based childcare that the Swedish welfare state provides. Only one participant disapprovingly refers to public childcare arrangements. Good parenting, as she puts it, means caring for the young child at home. But to her, education, work and career are essential components of life and thus parenthood turns out to be less of an option.

The present work suggests that notions of parenthood and the timing of parenthood are connected to notions of the child, auspicious childhoods and childrearing. The ways in which the child is defined imply rights and responsibilities connected to being a parent. Previous research has shown that there are two predominating discourses on the child in contemporary Western societies: the child as innocent and the child as competent (Brembeck et al. 2004; James et al. 1998; Lee 2005). The child as innocent imbues the idea of children being parents’ possessions and in need of protection and guidance (Lee 2005). Risks and dangers, both inside and outside the home, are emphasized, and parents are obliged to protect the child from these threats (James et al. 1998). The child as competent has grown in strength since the 1970s (Brembeck et al. 2004; Sandin and Halldén 2003), but the notion of the child as innocent has prevailed. This, in my view, is connected to the ‘child as project’ (Halldén 1991) and the ‘ideology of intensive parenthood’ (Hays 1996). That is, although pictured as competent, the innocent child is not made responsible for her/his actions; it is the parents’ responsibility to encourage, stimulate and actively raise the child so as to promote growing competence and independence. In this way, parenthood and childrearing turn into a labour intensive endeavour, connected with the risk of failure (Alwin 1996; Halldén 1991; Hays 1996; Wenzler 2004). The ambivalence and dilemmas caused by labour market demands contra childrearing ideals may be one explanation for the continuous decreasing fertility and postponed parenthood in the second demographic transition, indicated in the present study and elsewhere

(Alwin 1996; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Bäck-Wiklund and Bergsten 1997).

### *Normalcy and belonging*

As has been shown, the risks and uncertainties of parenthood are recurrently raised in the focus group discussions. Together with the desire to 'explore life' and to 'have done other things first', the uncertain outcomes of parenthood is what is most commonly referred to when postponement of the transition is justified and made understandable. But embracing a deferral of the transition is one thing and the repudiation of parenthood is another. Most Swedes and Europeans refer to themselves as wanting to have one or more children at some stage in life (Departementserien 2001; Goldstein et al. 2003), and the focus group participants mirror this picture. Although some are hesitant, the majority talk about parenthood as a taken-for-granted transition, and a life lived without having ever entered parenthood and without having experienced a child of one's own is commonly referred to as empty and dull, as something deviant – a misfortune. Parenthood appears to be a strong indication of normalcy – a socially and culturally expected transition and signifier of adulthood, by far the strongest and perhaps even the sole symbol of having become an adult in full. Parenthood, however, is also talked about as something that enables a refuge from adulthood. When justifying parenthood, the participants argue that the individual's youthful mind is maintained by the transition. Being and staying 'young' is stressed as being important. Young, in turn, is associated with flexibility, mobility and public activities and is referred to as the opposite of old, which is often related to words such as dull, immobile and inhibited.

Likely to have an impact on people's decision to enter parenthood is the desire to remain and be regarded as normal. The participants refer to groups of friends and acquaintances and how the status of normalness is compared in regard to them. In a group of mostly childless friends, the individual may hesitate to be the first to enter. On the other hand, being part of a social network in which more and more people become parents may trigger a desire to have a child, the focus group discussions propose. The present data support theories emphasizing the impact of the social

network on reproductive decision-making (see Bernardi 2003), but we have to look at the discourse on friendship to gain a broader understanding of why friends appear to have a rather great influence on the timing of parenthood. What does being a friend mean in contemporary times? The focus group participants' arguments resemble Giddens' (1992) theory on the pure relationship, that is, that a relationship between partners as well as friends is sustained on the premise of reciprocity, that both partners feel they are getting something out of the relationship. This view on relations, together with the discourse on parenthood and the change that the transition is imagined to entail, may be one reason why many focus group participants talk about a desire to enter parenthood together with friends. Friendship means sharing life and experiences; remaining childless or entering parenthood with friends decrease the risk of 'losing out' on socializing and friendships, that is, on relations of belonging.

In the present data, friendship, the romantic partner, standard parenthood and the nuclear family are pictures that connote stability and belonging. Perhaps it is feasible to suggest that the decision to enter parenthood may be a way of trying to resolve the ambivalence caused by the somewhat contradictory ideals of independence and belonging. At the end of the day, parenthood and family life may provide hope for belonging; they may serve as a contrary image to the emphasis on individual independence and all the risks connected to life as a parent and to life in general.

When the benefits of parenthood are discussed in the data, the child is associated with great social value. It is talked about as offering a relationship and company unlike any other relation, particularly when the parents grow old. Why is this? Why is a child of such value when a person grows old in a society where the general pension system and social welfare ensure that few elders are financially dependent on their children? The underlying notion implicit in the focus group reasoning, I propose, is that old age is connected with immobility and dependence, in accordance with Hockey and James' (1993) explication of how old age and aging are looked upon in the Western world of today. The child as a social resource and asset is talked about as being valued when one has become old and fragile, perhaps in the retirement home, and dependent on the goodwill of others. Here, family, and kin, in terms of children and possibly grandchildren, promise social stability, support and self-fulfilment through others, an

argument recurrently found in the focus groups. Hereby, the individualization discourse appears to affect also the reasoning around the value of kin and the value of the child. When the ideals inherent in the individualization discourse are hard to live up to, that is, when the public self and independence become difficult to accomplish, social stability is guaranteed through the child and the child only.

### *Gendered parenthood*

Previous studies have shown that the meanings of motherhood and fatherhood are multiple and often contradictory. For instance, both the traditional breadwinner model and an increased societal emphasis on the involved father affect notions of what fatherhood implies. As we know by now, in Sweden, since the 1960s, the political aim has been to enable the combination of paid labour and parenthood for women as well as men (Björnberg 2002). Yet researchers have questioned whether changes in fathers' practices have actually occurred. And while the sexes have been pictured as interchangeable, this notion runs counter to psychological theories about the mother's natural closeness to the child, and what Wall (2001) has called the breastfeeding discourse. Health centres pronounce the mother's importance for the child's physical and mental health, and breastfeeding is put forward as favourable (Kugelberg 1999; Wall 2001).

The present study shows that the notion of a gender-equal parenthood and the notion of biological difference have varying appeal among different individuals, but all the same create dilemmas owing to their concurrence. It is generally brought up in the focus groups that the man, the father, risks feeling left out, redundant and/or incapable of practicing new fatherhood due to, as it is referred to, the mother's natural closeness to the child owing to pregnancy and breastfeeding. Concurrently, the notion that the mother is the person on whom the child's current and future well-being relies may engender feelings of stress and anxiety in women. This has been established in studies on Swedish mothers (Elvin-Nowak and Thomsson 2001; Kugelberg 1999), but the present focus group data also indicate that childless women may reflect over whether they will have the energy and time left to be 'good enough' mothers. It is feasible to suggest that concerns of this sort may affect the timing of parenthood.

### *Body and age*

The physical implications of parenthood differ between men and women. It is the woman who experiences bodily implications, in those cases where the woman who becomes a parent has a biological child she herself has carried, still the far most common scenario when entering parenthood. Few women go through a pregnancy without experiencing different kinds of bodily hardships; in Sweden, many have troubles working full time throughout the pregnancy (The National Social Insurance Board 2003). Some women in the focus group data appeared to be concerned about the possible bodily implications of parenthood. Some of the parents mentioned physical hardships that the woman had endured due to pregnancy, delivery and/or breastfeeding. But positive aspects of childbearing and breastfeeding are also brought up. A woman can, through biology, experience parenthood differently from a man, it is argued.

The discourse on biology appears in different ways in different parts of the data. Two components of the discourse are the notion of the right age to enter parenthood and the risk of infertility and protracted conception. 'Getting older' and 'coming to that age' are recurrently used as arguments for what triggered the decision to try for a child. Participants, mainly women, talk about a biologically induced desire to enter parenthood when they reached about 30 years of age. Commonly mentioned in relation to age are infertility and the uncertain time needed for conception. Some argue that this uncertainty impacted on their decision to try for a child. Age is also referred to as something that may engender feelings of being too young for parenthood, and of being positioned as such by others. One parent in the data, in her mid-20s, appeared to feel the need to justify her decision to enter parenthood at 'such a young age'; another, a 26-year-old expecting parent, talked about reflecting over whether others would deem him too young for parenthood. Thus, it appears more appropriate to enter parenthood at around 30 than at around 20, according to the focus group positioning.

One conclusion of the present work is that bodily aspects in relation to parenthood surface in discussions on the timing and deferral of parenthood. Consequently, physiological consequences and notions of age and body come across as important subject matters to explore further in

studies on fertility and the timing of parenthood. There is clearly more to be done in this area.

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## Appendix: focus group composition

Focus group 1 Town/countryside	Jasmine 28 years old.	Working. High school degree. Various courses at university college.	Cohabiting. Has been together for 10 years.	No child.
	Sarah 30 years old.	Working. High school degree. Various courses at university college and at adult education school.	Cohabiting. Has been cohabiting for five years.	No child.
	Cleo 28 years old.	Studying at university college.	Cohabiting. Has been cohabiting for six years.	No child.
	Emma 28 years old.	Working. University college degree.	Cohabiting.	No child.

Focus group 2 Town/countryside	Stella 32 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting with Michael.	Parent. On parental leave.
	Michael 28 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting with Stella.	Parent.
	Maja 26 years old.	Working. University college degree.	Cohabiting.	Parent.
	Caroline 29 years old.	Working. University college degree.	Cohabiting with Harry.	Parent. On parental leave.
	Harry 31 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting with Caroline.	Parent.
	Angelina 32 years old.	Working. University college degree.	Cohabiting. Has been together for six years.	Parent. On parental leave.

Focus group 3 City	Amanda 31 years old.	Working. University college degree.	Cohabiting. Has been together for 4.5 years.	No child.
	Ella 33 years old.	Studying at university college. University college degree.	Single.	No child.

Focus group 4 Town/countryside	Anita 27 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting. Has been together for 2.5 years.	Parent. On parental leave.
	Agneta 29 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Married. Has been together for 11 years.	Parent. On parental leave.
	Jennifer 36 years old.	Unemployed. High school degree.	Cohabiting. Has been together for 5 years.	Parent. On parental leave.
	Vendela 39 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting. Has been together for 23 years.	Parent. On parental leave.

Focus group 5 City	Ursula 25 years old.	Studying at university college.	Boyfriend. Recent.	No child.
	Carl 28 years old.	Studying at university college.	Girlfriend since two years.	No child.
	Alice 33 years old.	Studying at university college.	Boyfriend since six months.	No child.
	Mona 24 years old.	Studying at university college.	Single.	No child.
	Liam 25 years old.	Studying at university college.	Girlfriend since 3.5 years.	No child.
	Jonathan 29 years old.	Studying at university college.	Single.	No child.

	Joel 26 years old.	Studying at university college.	Single.	No child.
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Focus group 6 City	Jill 28 years old.	Studying at university college.	Cohabiting. Has been together for 7 years.	No child.
	Brita 28 years old.	Working. University degree.	Cohabiting. Has been together for 6 years.	No child.
	Lisa 32 years old.	Working. University degree.	Boyfriend since one year.	No child.

Focus group 7 City	Max 26 years old.	Working. University degree.	Girlfriend since 8 months.	No child.
	Glen 24 years old.	Studying at university.	Girlfriend since 5 years.	No child.
	Nathan 26 years old.	Studying at university college.	Cohabiting since some years.	Parent-to-be.

Focus group 8 City	Eva 38 years old.	Working. University degree.	Married. Has been together for 3.5 years.	Parent.
	Dan 36 years old.	Working. University degree.	Married. Has been together for 6 years.	Parent.

Focus group 9 Town/countryside	Sabina 29 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting with Tobias. Has been together for 5.5 years.	No child.
	Tobias 30 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting with Sabina. Has been together for 5.5 years.	No child.
	Julia 29 years old.	Working. University degree.	Cohabiting with Noah. Has been together for 2.5 years.	Parent-to- be.
	Noah 26 years old.	Unemployed. High school degree.	Cohabiting with Julia. Has been together for 2.5 years.	Parent-to- be.