

Choosing Parenthood:

A Sociocultural Exploration of Highly Educated Women's Decision to Have Children in the Future

Rapportens samlede antal tegn: **119.597**, tilsvarende **49,83 normalsider**.
Herunder,

Del a): 59.782 anslag, tilsvarende 24,90 normalsider.

Del b): 59.815 anslag, tilsvarende 24,92 normalsider.

Nikki Müller Skjoldborg

Studienummer: **20174248**

Vejleder: **Paula Cavada-Hrepich**

10. Semester, Psykologi

Kandidatspeciale

Børnesprogklinikken

Aalborg universitet

Afleveringsdato: **30. maj 2022**

Abstract

The Nordic countries, as well as the western world in general, has seen tremendous changes in all spheres of life in recent history. Women in particular have more freedom than ever before in choosing how to participate in education, career and family life, amongst others. The Nordics have seen a general rise in lifelong childlessness, which has now started to plateau. With some researchers arguing that this can be partly attributed to a rise in voluntary childlessness, and with the universal access to contraceptives and abortion facilities in the Nordic countries, it is here argued that there has been a general shift in the freedom that individuals, and especially women, have to choose whether to become parents or not. Additionally, there might have been a shift in the ways that individuals perceive parenthood. Therefore, this thesis explores the decision-making processes taking place when women decide to have children. Due to a change in statistical trends, with highly educated women not following the general trends seen in society, this thesis will focus on these women. High levels of education in women used to be associated with higher chances of lifelong childlessness, with recent trends showing the directly opposite; highly educated women have falling levels of childlessness. Based on this, this thesis explores the understandings of highly educated women who have decided that they want to become parents in the future.

The thesis is constructed as a scientific article surrounded by elaborating sections, which seeks to expand on the methodological and theoretical basis of the thesis. The scientific article is formatted as an empirical study, within a qualitative framework, utilizing semi-structured interviews to explore the understandings of three highly educated Danish women. These interviews are then analysed by use of the theoretical framework of life-tracks, presented by Karsten Hundeide, to investigate the decision-making processes concerning future parenthood taking place in these women's lives. Furthermore, this theoretical approach allows an investigation into the expectations and aspirations of the women, concerning their

life courses and the contents therein. The study presents an understanding of the women's life-tracks as constituted by a number of smaller tracks, all interacting and intertwining in order to create the life-track that these women aspire to. For this to be possible, it is argued that the women must possess, and have confidence in, certain planning skills which enable them to structure and compose their life-tracks to achieve their ultimate goals: a certain type of family life. The women all describe the centrality of parenthood in both their choice of partner, as well as the way that they are structuring their lives. Despite this, they do not wish to experience parenthood without a partner, or to adopt, and based on this it is argued that a perceived ideal family life becomes the central goal for these women; a family in which they will feel a certain connection and belonging. Furthermore, the women are not planning to minimize their careers when becoming parents and describe an importance in the ability to progress and improve in a professional life simultaneously with developing a family. The study also explores the perceived skills of the women which might allow them access to certain life-tracks, while also examining a few specific opportunity situations in which the women must make decisions to shape their life-tracks. The study concludes on this, and comments on the potential fragility of the life-tracks of these women; despite their confidence that they will be able to achieve all their aspirations, the entire life-track is at risk should they not succeed in their ambitions in one sphere of their life. Following the presentation of the research article, the unfolding sections of the thesis pick up again. Here, the methodological and theoretical approaches employed in the study are discussed. It is argued that care must be shown in generalising the findings of the study, due to potential biases that arise from the methods employed. Finally, it is argued that the field of research could benefit from further exploration into this topic. Especially approaches seeking to understand for instance potential cultural shift in perceptions of connection and parenthood could be valuable in understanding the processes taking place when these women decide to become parents.

Table of contents

Introduction.....	1
Population trends regarding childbearing	2
Review of relevant existing research	3
Nordic studies	4
Problem field	6
Composition of this thesis.....	7
Methodology	7
Theoretical foundations of this thesis	7
A psychological perspective	8
Data collection method	8
Semi-Structured Interviews	9
Designing the Interview Protocol	9
Participant Recruitment	11
Ethical considerations	12
Position as a researcher	13
Theoretical perspective on decision making.....	15
Sociocultural tracks of development.....	16
Life-tracks	16
Opportunity situations.....	17
Access skills.....	17
Life-tracks in modern society	18
The theoretical approach of this thesis.....	18
Research Article: Choosing Parenthood: A Qualitative Study on Highly Educated Women’s Decision to Become Parents in the Future.	
Presented in full, including abstract and reference list. Separate page numbering.	
Discussion.....	19

Methods employed in the study	19
The semi-structured interview	20
Self-selection bias	20
Conducting the interviews	22
Researcher bias – addressing the findings	23
The theoretical approach utilized in the article.....	24
The original focus of the theoretical framework – marginalized youth.....	25
The life track as a series of smaller tracks	26
Conclusion	27
Future research	29
References.....	30
Curriculum	35

Appendices:

- Appendix 1: Interview protocol in Danish
- Appendix 2: Interview with Louise (Transcript)
- Appendix 3: Interview with Karoline (Transcript)
- Appendix 4: Interview with Marie (Transcript)
- Appendix 5: GDPR consent form in Danish
- Appendix 6: Participation consent form in Danish

Introduction

Choosing parenthood is today, more than ever before, a reflected choice that individuals and couples make for themselves. The world has changed in all spheres of life, and especially for women, the options available to them has opened in our recent history; both in terms of education, career, childbearing, and many others (Sobotka, 2017). Recent years has seen a rise in birth control options and availability in the Nordic countries (Petersen, 2019), which means that parenthood today often becomes a conscious choice to stop using contraceptives and try for a child. Therefore, romantic relationships do not necessarily lead to childbearing. Additionally, the ways in which women fit into family life is ever changing, and women's role in families has changed drastically in recent history (Parke, 2013). This might in part be attributed to the ever-changing social surroundings which affect the possibilities individuals have to shape their life, and the choices that they can make for themselves (Parke, 2013). Despite women in the western world potentially having more autonomy when shaping their lives than previously, some argue that the way the labour market is structured today puts pressure on women to choose between a career and becoming parents (Sobotka, 2017).

When looking at the way that this balance between family and work life is framed, women's childbearing is sometimes framed as an economic burden for the welfare-state, where women contribute less and receive more financial support from the government (Smith, 2012). This highlights an interesting point of inquiry: how does motherhood affect women's opportunities, for instance career wise? Here it becomes interesting to further our knowledge of the motivations and understandings that lead to women choosing parenthood despite the way in which this choice is framed as almost a burden to the welfare-state.

Based on this, the following thesis will investigate women's reasons for choosing parenthood. To gain insight into the decision to have children, and their own understanding

thereof, this study will investigate the understandings of women who have not yet had children, to avoid the effect that the experience of parenthood might have had. To further narrow down the demographic group to be investigated in this study, the following section will investigate the current population trends concerning parenthood.

Population trends regarding childbearing

In recent years, a rise in the number of childless adults has been seen across most European countries (Miettinen, 2015). Similarly, the number of childless adults in the US and Australia has seen a rise, when comparing women born in the late 1940s to women born in the late 1960s (Miettinen, 2015). In Denmark the number of 50-year-olds who do not have children has increased to 12,4% of women and 20,2% of men in 2015, from 8,2% of women, and 13,7% of men, in 1991 (Statistics Denmark, 2015, November). The accounted for trends in childlessness does not indicate the underlying reasons for the general rise in childlessness. However, a number of researchers have attributed part of the rise in childlessness seen in the western world to a rise in voluntary childlessness, as well as increasingly positive attitudes towards choosing a childfree lifestyle (Rowland, 2007). In the Netherlands, 6 in 10 women who do not have children report that they are childfree voluntarily, and as such has chosen this lifestyle (Statistics Netherlands, 2005, May).

For both men and women some variation is seen based on educational level, however for males the overall trend is the same (Statistics Denmark, 2020). For women, especially one group does not follow the general trend: the highly educated. The percentage of childless highly educated women at age 50 has fallen between 1995 and 2020 (Statistics Denmark, 2020), whereas other demographic groups have seen a consistent increase followed by a plateau (Jalovaara et al., 2018). As such, highly educated women do not follow the general societal trend and even have a lower chance of being childless at age 40 than for instance those with lower educational levels (Jalovaara et al., 2018). Based on this, this thesis aims to

understand women with high educational levels' decision to become parents. The following sections will present relevant existing research that investigates the choice to become a parent.

Review of relevant existing research

In recent years, the societal changes surrounding what constitutes a family, and the different contexts in which individuals are choosing to parent, has given rise to a number of investigations into the motivation and aspects influencing the choice to become parents. A large part of this field of research, has focused on the diverse and uncommon parenthood contexts which differ from the traditional nuclear family ideals (Parke, 2013). For instance, Volgsten and Schmidt (2021) who investigated the decision of Swedish single women to choose motherhood using sperm donors. This might indicate that we have seen a shift in the understandings surrounding the contexts in which parenting takes place, and as such, can argue that more fundamental understandings of what it means to parent might also have shifted (Parke, 2013).

When searching for current research which investigates the decision to have children in the general population, two things become apparent. Firstly, the field is not very well investigated, and finding relevant empirical studies proves challenging. Secondly, it becomes evident that this part of the field of research is highly dominated by quantitative studies utilizing large scale surveys to investigate attitudes towards childbearing. For instance, Boivin and colleagues (2018) investigated the factors affecting the fertility decision-making of individuals from 79 countries, using survey with set items. They found that some factors affecting the decision were more universal than others; aspects such as the desire for a child and the fulfilment of certain economical requirements were deemed relevant across countries, whereas other factors were more dependent on the context and country in question (Boivin et al., 2018).

Given the differences in the aspects affecting decision-making concerning future parenthood, depending on the context and country in question, it is important to be aware of the lack of generalisability of the findings of country specific studies. Therefore, this thesis will adopt a focus on the Nordic context, which includes Norway, Sweden, Finland, Iceland, and Denmark. This is due to the similarity between these countries, not only in the way that female educational levels have risen and developed in recent years, but also in the general historical fertility behaviour seen across the Nordic countries (Andersson et al., 2009).

Nordic studies

Generally, only few studies investigate the choice to have children, and often do so as part of a larger study concerned with for instance understandings of fertility. Several studies seek to clarify the desires to become parents, and the expectations for what parenthood would bring, but do not seek to understand the choice made by the participants to have children (e.g., Svanberg et al., 2006; Tydén et al., 2006). Some studies do however include the decision to become parents in their focus and will be explored in the following pages.

One study, conducted by Mortensen and colleagues (2012), investigated the attitudes and knowledge of 20- to 40-year-old Danish female health care professionals, in relation to motherhood and fertility. They used a survey format with set items which was to be agreed or disagreed with, in order to investigate the participants attitudes and knowledge. In regard to the importance of motherhood, most respondents agreed that they could not image to live a life without children in the future and found the experience of motherhood to be important (Mortensen et al., 2012).

Lampic and colleagues (2006) set out to investigate the intentions and attitudes concerning parenthood, as well as knowledge of fertility, amongst Swedish university students. They achieved this by use of a postal survey in which they participants could mark their attitudes on set item scores concerning a number of related questions (Lampic et al.,

2006). They found that the participants largely expected parenthood to bring personal development, an increase in both given and received love, as well as changed life priorities (Lampic et al., 2006).

Petersen and colleagues (2016) explored the attitudes concerning family formation in 20 Danish women aged 34-39 years who were scheduled to receive fertility counselling. The researchers utilized a semi-structured interview guide to investigate the family formation intentions of the participants (Petersen et al., 2016). Their results were condensed into four categories concerning the potential fertility decline, the difficulty of making the choice, the nuclear family as a dream, and solo mothering (Petersen et al., 2016). Petersen and colleagues (2016) frame the women's decision-making concerning fertility in modern society by use of the theoretical framework proposed by Giddens; in this understanding planning for parenthood is a part of a strategic planning of the life-course, which ties into the individual's self-identity.

Eriksson and colleagues (2012) investigated the reflections of highly educated women and men in Sweden concerning having children in the future. They aimed to understand this group given the prevalence of delaying parenthood in this demographic group in Sweden. They utilized semi-structures qualitative interviews and analysed these qualitatively following the interviews, to better gain a deep understanding of the reflections concerning whether or not they wanted to have children in the future (Eriksson et al., 2012). Eriksson and colleagues (2012) found that several factors affected the choice to have children in this group, which included reasons concerning the desire to be a part of the future, settling down as a family, and an awareness of societal pressures (Eriksson et al., 2012).

Generally, studies which seek to understand the decision of women to have children are difficult to find, and only few appear in literature searches. As seen above, none of the existing literature has focused mainly on understanding women's decision to become parents.

Some have included this in their studies, but their focus has been elsewhere (Mortensen et al., 2012; Lampic et al., 2006). Others did have a certain focus on the reflections and motivations concerning parenthood, but did not delve into this, given a split focus on other aspects of fertility and family formation (Petersen et al., 2016; Eriksson et al., 2012). As such, none of the studies included here have attempted to synthesise an in-depth understanding of the beliefs and perceptions which lead to the decision to become a parent. This indicates that this phenomenon might be taken for granted in current research, and that further research into the choice of parenthood is important if we are to understand this in-depth.

Problem field

As mentioned previously, the only group which has seen a fall in the number of childless women, is that of the highly educated. As such, it is of interest in this thesis to investigate this group of women's understandings regarding their decision to have children, seeing as they do not follow the general trend in society. Therefore, the focus of this thesis is highly educated women who have decided to have children but have not yet had them. Given the lack of research investigating the choice to become parents in-depth, this study will focus on the decision made by highly educated women, who choose to have children.

This thesis concerns the active choice for parenthood made by highly educated women and will not differentiate between women who are currently in relationships, and those who aren't. Additionally, the focus will be on younger women, who plan to have children, but are not yet parents, and are not actively trying to have children. Based on these considerations, this thesis aims to answer the following research question:

How do young women with higher levels of education understand their decision to become parents in the future?

The following section will briefly describe the composition of this thesis.

Composition of this thesis

The present thesis will be formatted as a research article surrounded by a two-part paper, which will aim to elaborate and expand the topics and themes which are included in the article. The following sections will present the methodological and theoretical approach employed in this thesis. Following this, the research article which consists of a qualitative study aimed at understanding the decision to become a parent amongst highly educated Danish women, will be presented in full. This includes separate page numbering, abstract and reference list. Finally, the concluding part of the thesis will discuss the methods utilized in the study and will aim to conclude on the findings of the thesis in general.

Methodology

The following sections will describe the methods employed in this study to attempt to understand the decision to become a parent.

Theoretical foundations of this thesis

From a theoretical standpoint, this thesis was initially inspired by the philosophical framework of phenomenology. Here the study of human experience focuses on trying to explore phenomena as they appear to the individual, without applying one's own preconceived ideas and others' understandings to this phenomenon (Langdrige, 2007). However, phenomenology has a distinct focus on the experience of the individual, and generally only include the social world of the individual to a small extent in attempting to understand this experience (Langdrige, 2007). As such, this thesis is inspired by this framework in its conceptualization, but during the initial research into the topic, the societal, social and cultural surroundings of women deciding to become parents became of interest. This was in part due to the previously described societal changes seen in women's position in society, and in part due to the notion that understanding the experience of the individual is dependent on understanding the context in which the individual is situated (Madureira, 2018).

Based on this, this thesis adopts a sociocultural perspective on psychology, in which human experience is bound by the social context in which it takes place (Hundeide, 2005). This approach allows an exploration into how women perceive and experience the social and cultural surroundings in which parenthood decision making takes place.

A psychological perspective

A large portion of the current research in this field has been conducted by healthcare professionals such as medical doctors and nurses (e.g., Eriksson et al., 2012; Lampic et al., 2006). As such, this thesis also aims to contribute to the field of research by applying a psychological approach in understanding the decision-making processes involved when highly educated women make the decision to have children. Hereby, the aim is to maintain a focus on the individual and their understandings, rather than for instance a focus on how to ensure reproductive health and fertility, as seen in some previous literature concerning childbearing reflections. The theoretical perspective employed will be presented later in the thesis.

Data collection method

Given the nature of the research statement, which emphasizes the understanding of the experiences of highly educated women in choosing to become parents in the future, the method utilized must allow for an exploration of their experience which does not affect the informant unnecessarily (Galletta, 2013). Additionally, the method used must also allow for the inclusion of themes and topics which were not apparent beforehand, and as such must have a certain degree of freedom (Galletta, 2013). For this purpose, a qualitative approach will allow for an exploration of the decision to pursue motherhood that is both continuous and allows room for the individual's experience, and yet founded in the existing research and literature concerning this topic (Galletta, 2013). One method which allows for this type of freedom in the data collection, is the semi-structured interview.

Semi-Structured Interviews

The semi-structured interview is characterized by a loosely set structure, which acts more as a guideline in making sure that the interview does not veer too far off from the intended topic of the interview, rather than a set list of questions which the informant must answer (Galletta, 2013). This allows for enough structure to ensure that the topic under investigation is adhered to, but also allows for the informant to add or include new themes or aspects related to the investigation (Galletta, 2013). This can be achieved with an interview protocol, which can assist the interviewer in maintaining the focus of the interview, as well as provide a list of potential questions which could be asked in case of a lull in the conversation (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). This protocol can be structured by use of relevant themes or topics, and suggestions for questions to be asked (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Depending on the purpose with conducting the interview, the interviewer might not follow this protocol carefully, but rather use it as seems relevant to the exploration of the informant's experience or attitude (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

This approach to data-collection furthermore allows for a deeper investigation of the informant's attitudes, given that the interviewer can ask for clarification or elaboration (Galletta, 2013). This might contribute to a more thorough understanding of the research question, as the interviewer is able to further explore the given theme, depending on the input of the informant.

Designing the Interview Protocol

The interview protocol can be seen as the researchers' preliminary expectations regarding relevant themes and questions concerning the given topic of investigation. The protocol functions as a guide for the interview, and as such must allow for both theory driven and open-ended questions, as to best allow for an in-depth exploration of the given subject

matter (Galletta, 2013). For this thesis, the design of the interview protocol (see appendix 1) is inspired by existing findings of previous research into the topic

Previous literature has identified several different themes and aspects of the choice to become parents. Previous research into the motivation for choosing parenthood has mapped the underlying reasons through different data collection methods, including set item surveys (Boivin et al., 2018; Lampic et al., 2006; Mortensen et al., 2012) and by use of semi-structured interviews (Eriksson et al., 2012; Petersen et al., 2016). Some themes repeat across studies, where others seem more specific to the individual study. One major theme which seems to be of a more widespread character is the individuals *desire for parenthood/to have a child*, both globally (Boivin et al., 2018; Ganle et al., 2020; Langdridge et al., 2005) as well as in the Nordics (Eriksson et al., 2012; Petersen et al., 2016; Volgsten & Schmidt, 2021). This theme covers a large array of subthemes, for instance the *biological drive to carry on one's genes* (Eriksson et al., 2012; Petersen et al., 2016), as well as the *desire to participate in the development of another human being* (Eriksson et al., 2012). Another theme which has been included across several Scandinavian studies, is that of *becoming a family*, which, amongst others, includes the dream of becoming a nuclear family, as well as the wish to settle down (Eriksson et al., 2012; Petersen et al., 2016) and *societal pressure*, which includes subthemes such as *fear of social exclusion* as well as the *expectations of others*, and *childbearing as a given for women* (Eriksson et al., 2012; Petersen et al., 2016; Volgsten & Schmidt, 2021).

The interview protocol created for this study is inspired by these themes, as well as others brought up in existing literature, and includes questions meant to facilitate both the informant's own account of their understanding of the decision to become a parent, as well as questions more founded in the findings from existing literature (Galletta, 2013). Additionally, the interview protocol includes prompts which include statistics regarding childbearing

trends. For this thesis, the interviews were recorded on an audio recorder and subsequently transcribed verbatim. The interviews were all conducted and transcribed in Danish, and relevant quotes translated to English while maintaining the original meaning and wording as much as possible (See appendix 2 through 4 for transcripts).

Participant Recruitment

When recruiting participants to inform the study, several considerations, such as occupation and age, are important to be aware of, given the potential effect that participant selection might have on the resulting data (Galletta, 2013).

The average age at which women in Denmark seek fertility treatments is 33 (Russel, 2015). In order to not also include women who have started fertility treatments, or for whom the thought of declining fertility might have excessively affected their attitude towards childbearing, participants of more than 33 years of age are not of interest in this study. Therefore, the participant limitations exclude women above 33 years of age. In the same line of reasoning, women who have already had children, or are actively working to become pregnant, are also excluded. Additionally, given the attitudes towards the societal cost of childbearing explained previously, women who have entered the workforce is especially of interest in this study (Smith, 2012). As such, women who have not yet finished their degree are not included in this study.

Participants were recruited by use of referral from colleagues, and general word of mouth. Social media posts were also posted in select relevant groups, to attempt to reach relevant potential informants. Three women were included for interviews. Both “Louise” and “Karoline” were interviewed in their own homes, whereas “Marie” was interviewed in a classroom supplied by the researcher on a calm Saturday. Cake was brought along to all the interviews as a way of thanking the informants for participating, as well as in an attempt to make the interview situation less formal. For the two interviews taking place in the

informants' homes, they supplied coffee and tea, and for the final interview the researcher also brought this along. In order to protect the informants of this study, a number of ethical consequences are important to consider. These will be described in the following section.

Ethical considerations

When conducting qualitative research, it is vital to first consider the ethical consequences of carrying out the data collection. In this thesis, semi-structured interviews constitute the data-collection. Therefore, certain ethical considerations are essential in ensuring that appropriate care and respect is shown towards the individuals participating in the interviews in all phases of the research process (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Qualitative research aims to allow for individuals to express their beliefs, opinions, and personal experiences, and therefore often come into contact with the more intimate and private aspects of the lives of the individuals participating (Brinkmann, 2015). As such, it falls to the researcher to ensure that certain ethical guidelines are followed in dealing with this exploration of the lives of the participants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Amongst others, considerations concerning confidentiality, informed consent, the potential consequences of conducting the study, as well as the researchers own role in the investigation are important aspects to consider when carrying out qualitative research (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

In this study, the confidentiality of the participants is ensured by anonymization of the participants, both in the interview transcripts as well as in the thesis. Only information of a general nature which does not allow readers to identify the informant is included in the study. The participants were also informed of the degree of anonymization and the extent to which the information uncovered in the interviews is used and consented to this prior to initiating the interviews. Informed consent is strived for using detailed participation consent forms (see appendix 5 & 6) detailing both the participants rights and the purpose and intended use of the interview.

The researcher is responsible for attempting to protect the participant from potential consequences of carrying out the investigation, for instance in the form of unpleasant experiences, and to be conscious of ways to ensure the protection of the informant throughout the interview and the following analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). One way that this is done is to remain conscious of not overstepping the boundaries of the parts of the informant's life that you are welcome in, for instance by not asking too private questions, and ensuring that the informant is comfortable to decline answering questions that they are not comfortable with (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). Additionally, as a researcher conducting an interview, one should also be aware of the potential of the informant oversharing due to the intimate nature of qualitative interviews (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). As such, there is a duality in ensuring that the participant feels comfortable and safe in the interview, but also being aware of the potential consequences of this.

The safety of the participant must also be ensured on a macro ethical plan, where the results of the investigation, and the following publishing of these might bring with it more general, societal consequences (Brinkmann, 2015). This can both be positively by way of societal changes which increase openness and understanding, or it might provoke policy changes which help the informant (Brinkmann, 2015). Contrarily, potential negative consequences such as increased stigma of the group under investigation might also follow (Brinkmann, 2015). Therefore, in both collecting the data and producing and publishing the resulting paper, the researcher must be aware of the potential consequences that might follow from the investigation and try to avoid negative ones (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

Position as a researcher

One's own position as a researcher is also essential to consider, especially when conducting research of this type. The quality and ethical soundness of the research is dependent on the researchers own ability to remain both passive as well as engaging toward

the informants (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). On the one side, professional distance and passivity towards the informants is paramount in ensuring that you do not take sides or favor one account or certain results over others (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015). On the other side, remaining open and engaging towards the informant to ensure a pleasant experience, as well as a safe space in which they feel comfortable sharing their experiences and thoughts (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

As the researcher conducting the interviews for this study, I furthermore must be aware of potential bias that might result from my own similarity to the demographic group under investigation. I am a Nordic woman in the middle of my twenties, who plans on having children in the future. I am however not yet finished with my higher education and am therefore not employed yet. The similarities do however mean that I must be aware of not drawing conclusions based on my own opinions on the phenomena. Throughout the thesis this is attempted by use of theoretical perspectives in guiding the analysis, to not draw excessively on biased understandings. Furthermore, I am aware of the risk and try to discuss relevant things with my supervisor to best avoid biased conclusions to be drawn. My own position might also in some ways help guide the thesis, as the fact that I have grown up in a society where parenthood is a choice has shaped my own understanding of, and approach to working with, this phenomenon. It has shaped my understanding of parenthood as an active choice, and had I not been close to the demographic in question, my views might be remarkably different. As such, my own pre-existing assumptions can also be viewed as a tool in the preliminary work with the themes of this study, if I show appropriate care in not letting these affect my findings and the data processing. Additionally, one way of also attempting to limit personal bias is through transparency in the paper concerning my pre-existing understandings and assumptions.

Before starting this thesis, my assumptions and understandings were based on my own experiences with the choice and expectation of becoming a parent in the future. I viewed the choice as an important one, and not one to be taken lightly, given the potential consequences of having children, both for the children brought into this world and for the parents. This has sparked an interest in how others navigate this decision, especially given the changes in the freedom that individuals in the Nordic countries today are afforded in making the choice. By being aware of my pre-existing assumptions and opinions concerning the phenomenon, I hope to be able to allow the voices of the informants to be the ones carrying the analysis as well as the findings of this thesis.

Theoretical perspective on decision making

In investigating the understandings of highly educated women concerning their choice to become parents in the future, the use of a psychological theoretical approach on decision making might enable a deeper examination of these understandings on the individual level. In psychology, one central approach to decision-making which has been given considerable attention by researchers is that of cognitive psychology, in which the use of concepts such as heuristics guide the theoretical understanding of decision making (Hardman & Macchi, 2004). However, as previously describe, recent history has seen vast changes in women's positions in society, and the sociocultural contexts, here understood as the cultural beliefs, habits and traditions of a given group of people (Cambridge Dictionary, 2020), in which women find themselves have therefore changed (Bergqvist et al., 1999; Sobotka, 2017). To best investigate the research question of this thesis, a theoretical approach which would allow an investigation into the sociocultural context and the effect of this on decision making might enable a greater understanding of the processes and understandings involved when highly educated women make the decision to have children in the future. Therefore, for instance a cognitive approach to this phenomenon might limit the opportunity and ability to thoroughly

investigate the sociocultural contexts which shape the decision making of these women. Therefore, this thesis draws on sociocultural understandings of the societal and cultural contexts in which the individual is embedded as one of the ways in which we can seek to understand the individual and their life.

Sociocultural tracks of development

Hundeide (2005;2004) presents an approach to analysing decision making and human development which draws on sociocultural understandings of the individual's journey through life as imbedded in a societal and cultural context. In this approach, the contents of an individual's life are organized in *life-tracks* and associated *lifestyle packages* in which the self-identity is constructed as a series of attributes, life-style characteristics, actions, skills, understandings, and beliefs which must be compatible with one another (Hundeide, 2005). These form the contextual frame of reference based on which new decisions are made, and certain contents therein might enable or restrict the choices that can be made (Hundeide, 2005). Hundeide (2005;2004) applies this approach to his work concerning unsuccessful marginalized youngsters who are for instance drawn to neo-Nazi movements. Hundeide (2004) generally also employs the theoretical approach more broadly in understanding developmental processes and the processes involved in decision-making. As such, this theoretical approach lends itself to understanding developmental phenomena (Hundeide, 2004). In this thesis the theoretical approach is applied to young women's decision to become parents in the future, as it is argued here that this can be viewed as a developmental process in which the individual decides on and negotiates and shape their present and future life-track.

Life-tracks

In this understanding the individual is embedded in sociocultural contexts, which can be viewed as a variety of life-tracks. The given life-track of an individual guides their attempt

to sustain the identity that accompanies the specific life-track (Hundeide, 2005). These life-tracks exist beyond the individual and interact with social categories such as gender or ethnicity to shape the expectations attributed to the specific life-track, as well as the life-tracks available to the person (Hundeide, 2005). As such, the possible decisions that individuals can make is highly contingent on the specific life-track that they are on, both when it comes to external, social, pressure, as well as internal pressure to maintain their own understanding of their identity as individuals (Hundeide, 2005). As such, choices made must be compatible with the individual's life-track, and actions of the individual constantly either prepares for potential future actions or renders certain actions or decisions incongruent with the given life-track (Hundeide, 2005).

Opportunity situations

The individual continuously shapes their life-track based on the decisions that they make. This is done through *opportunity situations*, which refer to the situations in which the individual decides between different options (Hundeide, 2005). Options might be available to the individual but not congruent with the current life-track, or simply not perceived by the individual (Hundeide, 2005). Finally, some opportunities are both available to the individual, and are in accordance with the life-tracks on which they find themselves, and therefore appear as the correct or possible opportunities presented to the individual, which is then followed with varied degrees of reflection there upon (Hundeide, 2005).

Access skills

To follow or enter specific life-tracks, the individual must possess specific *access skills* that qualify them for access to specific life-tracks (Hundeide, 2005). These access skills can vary in type and can be anything from the ability to act a certain way to specific skills needed to inhabit a specific life-track, such as reading to receive secondary schooling or the ability to calculate the correct amount of change to become a street vendor (Hundeide, 2005).

Other access skills are more implicit and less conscious available to the individual and can for instance allow the individual to interact with and present themselves correctly to other people (Hundeide, 2005). Not only must these access skills be present in order for the individual to gain access to the specific life-track, but they must also be aware of their own ability and thus be able to view themselves as able to succeed in the life-track (Hundeide, 2005).

Life-tracks in modern society

In this understanding, modern society has allowed for a less rigid adherence to traditional social structures, and an individual's life-track has become increasingly difficult to predict based on simply the social categories which the individual inhabits (Hundeide, 2005). The previously accepted and taken for granted life-tracks that come with certain social identities and categories are no longer rigid, and alternative life-tracks are emerging (Hundeide, 2005). This both allows for but also forces the individual to increasingly reflect on and plan the life they want for themselves, as well as increases the pressure on the individual to master this life-track that they have created for themselves (Hundeide, 2005). Furthermore, this forces the individual to continuously negotiate the choices they make concerning their life-track, and opportunities which might not previously have been afforded them by the socio-cultural position that they find themselves in, might become available (Hundeide, 2005).

The theoretical approach of this thesis

The theoretical framework proposed by Hundeide (2005;2004), will form the basis for working with the data collected from the semi-structured interviews. The following pages will present the research article in full and will include further descriptions of the women recruited for the interviews. Following the presentation of the research article, the methodological and theoretical approach of this thesis will be discussed.

**Choosing Parenthood: A Qualitative Study on Highly Educated Women's Decision to
Become Parents in the Future**

Author: Nikki Müller Skjoldborg

Course: Master's Thesis

Supervisor: Paula Cavada-Hrepich

Hand in: 30th of May 2022

Abstract

Background: Recent years has seen an increase in the freedom available to Nordic women when choosing how to engage in countless spheres of life. Women today have the option to choose how they would like to engage in for instance education and career. Simultaneously the Nordic countries has seen a rise in lifelong childlessness, which has now started to plateau. Due to availability of contraceptives, parenthood is, probably more than ever before, an active choice that individuals and couples make. One demographic group seem to stand out; highly educated women, contrarily to previous statistical trends, have falling levels of childlessness. As such, higher levels of education are no longer associated with a higher chance of childlessness for women. **Existing literature:** Preliminary literary searches concerning the decision to have children revealed a sparsely investigated field researched and indicated that this topic often only appeared as a subdomain of studies investigating for instance fertility awareness. This indicated a need to explore the parenthood decision making in-depth. **Aim:** Based on this, this study aims to explore the understandings of highly educated Danish women who have decided to become parents in the future. **Method:** To investigate this, a qualitative methodology is employed to access the accounts of three highly educated Danish women, who had all decided that they would like to become parents in the future. Data collection was carried out through semi-structured interviews, utilizing an interview protocol based on previous findings and literature concerning the choice to have children. Following the data collection, this study aims to understand these women's perceptions of their own decision-making through the sociocultural framework of life-tracks proposed by Karsten Hundeide. Data analysis was carried out in relation to conceptualisation and notions presented in this theoretical framework. **Results:** Findings indicated that the women all understood parenthood as central in achieving the specific type of family that they desired. However, they did not want to experience this alone, and therefore a romantic

relationship is seen as vital in enabling the family life that the women desire. Furthermore, the women all valued their careers, and did not intend to give up these once they became parents. Rather, the women all appeared confident that they would be able to manage all their aspirations for the professional as well as private lives. In the conceptual framework presented by Hundeide, the life-tracks of the women interviewed for this study is understood to be composed of several smaller tracks, all containing their own aspirations and progression. Each track appears dependent on the others to create the life-tracks of the women, and each track is made possible by a flexible approach to managing the life-track in which the tracks must give way for one another at certain times in the women's lives. Hundeide's concepts of access skills and opportunity situations are furthermore used to explore how the women understand their own access to, and negotiation of, life-tracks in society. This allows for a deeper understanding of the decision-making process taking place when these women decide that they want to become parents. **Conclusions:** Based on this analysis and discussion, the desire life-tracks of the women appear to be characterised by a confidence in their ability to plan and structure these in a manner allowing them to include all the components that they wish for, and simultaneously achieving this to a high standard. This study concludes on the life tracks of these women by commenting on the fragility of the life tracks that they are creating, and by questioning whether modern cultural perceptions of family and connection have evolved with the changing social policy and contexts. In the aspirations presented by the women, their ultimate success in shaping their life-tracks becomes dependent on the mutual success in several spheres of their life. As such, parenthood is described as a central aspect of the life-track by all the women, but they describe how they want to achieve this under specific conditions. Conditions which they appear confident that they can achieve.

Introduction

In the last century, the world has rapidly changed in all spheres of life. This has particularly been the case for women in the Nordic countries who have blazed a trail striving for equality, as Nordic women now possess more freedom in choosing for themselves how to engage in education, career, and, particularly, in childbearing (Sobotka, 2017). Recent years has seen a rise in lifelong childlessness across large parts of the western world, which has started to plateau in parts of the Nordic countries (Miettinen, 2015; Jalovaara et al., 2018). This rise in childlessness might partly be explained due to the wide availability of both contraceptives and abortion facilities (Danish Health Authority, 2019). As such, more freedom might exist in choosing how to shape one's life, where childbearing has become an active choice that women are faced with, and one which can be avoided if they so wish.

Additionally, women nowadays can engage in family life in diverse ways, as a variety of family forms are seen and accepted across societies (Parke, 2013). Over the course of the last century, social policies implemented in the Nordic countries have increased women's participation in both educational institutions as well as the work force making them economically independent workers (Bergqvist et al., 1999). This has brought with it a dual-breadwinner model in which women no longer solely manage the home and family life, and instead contribute financially to the household (Bergqvist et al., 1999). Childcare no longer falls solely on women, and social policy has aimed to further equality between the sexes, for instance through the implementation of father's quotas of parental leave (Bergqvist et al., 1999; Danish Ministry of Employment, n.d.). However, despite the move towards more equal parenting in recent years, most of the childcare and unpaid labour in the home still falls to women (Bergqvist et al., 1999).

Furthermore, some argue that the way the labour market is structured today puts pressure on women to choose between a career and becoming parents (Sobotka, 2017). From

an economic perspective, women's childbearing is framed as a financial burden for the welfare-state and the skewed amount of parental leave between women and men is seen as a waste of women's competences and talents (Smith, 2012). In fact, although women are more likely to be highly educated, and generally perform better in school, they occupy less leadership positions, and their lifetime earnings are lower than men's (Smith, 2012). In this context, an interesting statistical trend concerning women's childbearing and education has emerged in recent years: the number of highly educated Danish women who are childless at age 50 has fallen between 1995 and 2020 (Statistics Denmark, 2020). This is directly opposite of previous trends, where high levels of education were linked to a higher chance of childlessness (Jalovaara et al., 2018). In other words, highly educated women are choosing to have children regardless of how childbearing is framed in media and contrarily to general societal trends. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore how highly educated women understand this decision to become parents in the future.

Existing research

Within the context of the Nordic countries, where women share a large part of their historic and contextual condition (Andersson et al., 2009), the field of research investigating the choice to have children is not very well explored. Oftentimes the focus of studies is divided, with an emphasis on for instance fertility awareness (Mortensen et al., 2012; Lampic et al., 2006). Research investigating the choice of highly educated women to have children is difficult to find, and studies with a similar focus only sparsely appear in literary searches. Some focus on the attitudes of women who are set to receive fertility counselling, but they do not differentiate based on educational levels of the women (Petersen et al., 2016). Others have a split focus and only investigate the choice to have children as a part of a larger investigation into childbearing reflections but do focus on the highly educated (Eriksson et al., 2012). None of the studies identified here aims to understand the decision to become a

parent in-depth, which indicates that this phenomenon might be taken for granted in research and thus requires attention. This becomes especially relevant if we are to understand and support the changes seen in society today, such as changing perceptions of parenthood, both as health-care professionals as well as in the policy making surrounding childbearing.

Theoretical framework: Socio-cultural perspective

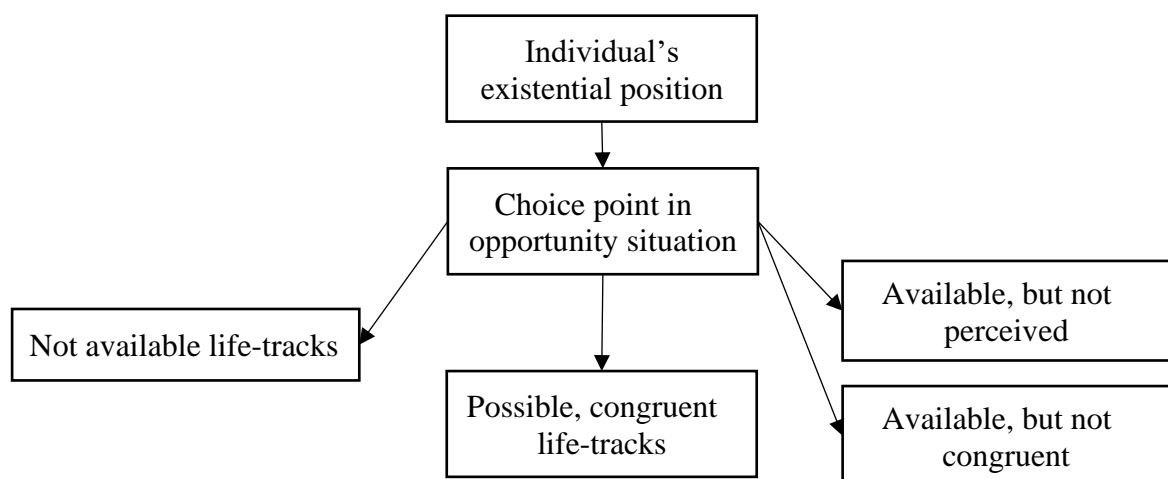
To investigate the understandings of highly educated women concerning their choice to become parents, this study applies a sociocultural understanding of human development that assumes an interdependency between development and the sociocultural context in which it takes place. To explore this, the sociocultural perspective of Karsten Hundeide (2005) is employed. This approach differs from for instance a cognitivist perspective by addressing decision making in a context of socio-cultural tracks of development (Hundeide, 2005). This approach contributes to a general understanding of decision making in which decisions in life cannot be seen as independent from the circumstances in which they take place. Hundeide (2005) employs this theoretical framework to understand developmental processes and decision making in marginalised unsuccessful youth. In this study, this theoretical framework is applied to understanding highly educated women's decision to become parents based on the argument that this change in their lives can be viewed as a developmental process involving decision making.

In this approach, identity formation and development in the individual is guided by sociocultural *life-tracks* (Hundeide, 2005). These life-tracks are set tracks which the individual follows through life, and that guide the developmental process (Hundeide, 2005). In this understanding, human development is not seen as an individualistic process, but rather as situated in a pre-existing sociocultural structure in which the individual is born and must find their way, their life-track. The contents of these life-tracks are constituted of specific *lifestyle packages*. A lifestyle package contains anything from understandings and

conceptions of reality and the self, ideology, position and status in social contexts, belonging, practises and much else (Hundeide, 2005). To access certain life-tracks, the individual must possess certain *access skills*, which are skills and abilities, which allow the individual to be able to follow a given life-track (Hundeide, 2005). In this understanding the individual's path through life is shaped by the given *opportunity situations* in which the person finds themselves. These are situations in which the individual has the choice between different actions that will lead them down their life-track (Hundeide, 2005). The choices made must be compatible with the given life-track that the individual finds themselves on, and often decisions made must prepare for the following actions that the individual wishes to take (Hundeide, 2005). As seen in figure 1, the possible options that the individual has in each opportunity situation can vary in both availability to the individual, whether they are aware of the option, and the degree to which the choice is congruent with the current and desired life-track of the individual.

Figure 1

Model of psychological opportunity situations, modified from Hundeide (2005).



As proposed by Hundeide (2005), the life-tracks of individuals in traditional society were greatly bound by the social categories that defined them, and only certain life-tracks was available to them based on the socio-cultural categories which they belonged to. Life-

tracks such as homemakers and mothers were the ones most readily available to women, and the availability of choices was greatly limited (Bergqvist et al., 1999; Hundeide, 2005).

However, with modern society some of these social structures which characterised traditional society, are becoming less rigid, and new life-tracks are becoming available to individuals regardless of social categories (Hundeide, 2005). According to Hundeide (2005) this change in the rigidity of social structures means that individuals are now required to reflect upon and plan for themselves the life that they wish for and are in turn expected to master and succeed in the life-tracks that they create for themselves. This leads to a continuous negotiation of choices as new opportunities arise for women which has not previously been afforded them by their socio-cultural position (Hundeide, 2005). Despite increasing equality in childcare and maternity leave, most unpaid labour and childcare in the home still fall to women (Bergqvist et al., 1999). As such, the sociocultural contexts of Nordic women might still limit their freedom in shaping their life-tracks.

This study aims to explore the way in which highly educated women understand and negotiate the choices and opportunities concerning parenthood that their sociocultural context affords them. This is done using this conceptualization of life-tracks and the accompanying perspectives on decision-making. The following section will describe the methodological considerations and limitations of the present study.

Methods

This study draws on a qualitative framework of understanding in aiming to explore the understandings of the highly educated women concerning future parenthood. As the focus of this study is to explore and understand the perspective of the individual, the semi-structured interview is chosen to capture the unique experience of individuals who fit the focus of the study (Galletta, 2013). This is due to the flexible nature of the semi-structured

interview, in which the informant can include aspects of their experience that the interviewer might not have been aware of (Galletta, 2013).

Interview protocol

The interviews were conducted using an interview protocol, allowing room for the informant's own immediate reflections of their decision to have children, as well as more specific questions aimed at exploring this understanding further (Galletta, 2013). These questions were anchored in relevant themes identified in previous research into similar fields of study (Boivin et al., 2018; Eriksson et al., 2012; Ganle et al., 2020; Lampic et al., 2006; Langdrige et al., 2005; Mortensen et al., 2012; Petersen et al., 2016; Volgsten & Schmidt, 2021). These themes included the desire for parenthood, becoming a family, career, and societal pressure. The interview guide included both open-ended questions as well as prompts aimed at expanding the participant's reflections and accounts related to the decision of having children.

Informants and setting

The criteria for selecting the participants were age, educational level, childlessness, and employment situation. Based on the age at which Danish women on average seek fertility treatments (Russel, 2015), women over the age of 33 were not included, to avoid informants for whom the question of fertility decline might excessively affect their understandings. Additionally, to steer clear of the potential biases that might come with already having had children, women who are already parents, or are actively trying to have a child, were excluded. Finally, given the attitudes towards childbearing and the societal cost of childbearing explained previously (Smith, 2012), women who have entered the workforce is of particular interest to this study. Therefore, women who have yet to finish their master's degree are not included.

The participants were recruited through word of mouth, and through a limited number of social media posts in closed groups consisting of potentially relevant individuals.

Interested individuals were encouraged to contact the researcher by e-mail or phone. Prior to the interviews, consent forms were emailed to the participants, allowing them to read through them beforehand. To protect the anonymity of the participants, aliases are used when presenting the findings. Three interviews were conducted and took place either in the informants' homes or in a room supplied by the researcher, and were audio recorded.

Participant characteristics

All the informants in this study have completed a master's degree and were planning to become parents in the future. Below follows a short description of each woman.

“Louise”

Louise, a 25-year-old engineer living in a large city in Denmark, had been in a committed relationship for approximately 9 months and was not living with her partner. Ideally, she wanted to have children around the age of 30, but she stated that age was not the most important factor.

“Karoline”

Karoline, a 29-year-old high ranking military officer living in a medium sized suburb to a major Danish city, was not in a relationship when the interview was conducted but was dating and actively looking for a partner. She had previously wanted to become a mother before the age of 30 but had recently accepted that this would not be possible. She now wished to have children while she was still in her early 30s.

“Marie”

Marie, a 23-year-old psychologist who lives in a medium sized city in Denmark, was in a committed relationship at the time of the interview and had been with her partner for 2½

years. They had recently moved in together. If it was up to her, she would like to have the first child in her late 20s, and the next one a few years later.

Data analysis

The following sections aim to explore the accounts and understandings of the participants by use of Hundeide's (2005) theoretical framework of life-tracks, access skills and opportunity situations. This theoretical framework informed the data analysis, in which the transcripts were read and coded based on the concepts and notions presented in Hundeide's theoretical framework, which were used as analytical tools in understanding the accounts of the three participants. The following analysis and discussion will first focus on understanding how these women understand, negotiate, and navigate planning their life-tracks. Following this, we will use the conceptualizations of opportunity situations and access skills to further explore how the women understand and negotiate different options when shaping their life-tracks. Finally, a section considering the sociocultural contexts of the women is presented.

The life-tracks of highly educated women

The following section will explore the characteristics of the life-tracks of the three women included in this study, using the theoretical framework proposed by Hundeide (2005). The components of the life-track that the women describe will be explored, followed by an investigation into how the women navigate and understand the planning of their life-track.

Parenthood - a choice?

All three women express a deep-seated desire to become parents. Their motivations and the ways that they expressed this desire differed, but common for them all was that they had *always* known that they wanted to have children. Marie formulated it as a natural given knowledge that she had never had to actually consider: "so it's just naturally always been something that I wanted ... it wasn't a conscious choice..." (Marie, line 46), and that was

ingrained in the way she had always understood herself: "... but I have as I said always thought that I was going to become a mother" (Marie, line 1457). Both Louise and Karoline corroborated this, Louise added that it was not something that she had ever considered the reason for (Louise, line 859). As such, they understood their desire to have children as an innate feeling; an understanding that they had always had.

When asked to elaborate on what made her know that she wanted to become a parent, Louise mentioned the societal norm of parenthood: "I don't know if it is also because it has been so natural in society that you have children at some point" (Louise, line 65). Drawing on the concepts of Hundeide (2005), one way to understand why this desire is not one that the women included in this study had given much thought, could be that the sociocultural surroundings in which they were born, becoming a parent at some point in life is included in most life-tracks.

"When not if"

When asked if she felt a pressure to have children, Marie expressed that "so of course it is the usual, but it also just makes it what you are used to and what you continue with... so indirectly ... it's probably not something that can be avoided" (Marie, line 825). As such, she viewed the effect of the societal norm of parenthood to have an unavoidable effect on her own desire. In the contexts of life-tracks, the norm of parenthood experienced by Marie, can be viewed as a part of the sociocultural landscape in which she is situated (Hundeide, 2005). Karoline expressed a sort of coherence between her own desire and the societal expectations put on her, but was still annoyed at the thought of being pressured to make the choice:

It's one of those things that I haven't ehm ... don't really want to acknowledge that has affected me but that probably has ... Its probably somewhere like alle the way in the back of my brain there is something that tells me that it uhm ... I'm going to do it because that is what you do ... and it's not something that I oppose because I

want to but ... I can't uhm ... rule out that there is also something like socially ... uhm culture-wise that has affected me ... and that annoys me a little bit (Karoline, line 805).

One way to understand this annoyance with the sociocultural pressures effect on the choice to become a parent, is to view this as an example of the increased individual pressure to master and plan one's life. As described earlier, Hundeide (2005) argued that the decreasing rigidity of the life-tracks available to individuals in modern society, means that the individual experiences an increased pressure to master their life-track. To feel this mastery, it is possible that Karoline needs to feel in control of the choices made; a certain agency in shaping her life-track. When talking about the choice to have children, Karoline described how "... maybe it's because in the past it was just something you did ... you just had kids and you had lots of kids and you had them early ... whereas now there's a lot more focus on what you actually want to do ..." (Karoline, line 726). . We can argue that Karoline might be aware of a larger amount of freedom in choosing whether to have children and in shaping her life-track, but still felt a certain societal pressure to conform to the norm.

One way in which these women described that they experienced this type of societal and social pressure to have children, was in the way that others questioned childless adults about their intentions to have children. When asked about her experience of whether it is a basic assumption that people want children, Louise answered: "...yes I think there is definitely more of an attitude in society that you ... that everyone wants children at some point" (Louise, line 1356). Marie and Karoline both similarly expressed this, with Karoline also being opposed to this way of talking about potential parenthood. (Marie, line 787; Karoline, line 421). Based on this, we can argue that despite the women all feeling a certain agency in making the choice for themselves, they all agree that the society that they live in has a basic assumption of parenthood being something that everyone desires and wants to

achieve at some point in life. We can here add to our understanding of how most life-tracks in society contain parenthood eventually, by also arguing that not only do these life-tracks contain parenthood, but the general assumption is also that people *want* to have children. It becomes not a question of *if* they want to become parents, but a question of *when*. As such, we can argue that not only is the addition of parenthood to the life-track a societal expectation placed on individuals, but it is also expected that individuals desire to have children.

Louise described how: “I think there is also a tendency when people have been in a relationship for a few years then it like starts to come” (Louise, line 1354). With this she is referencing the question of when people are going to have children and explains how there is an expectation that children will follow a committed relationship. One way to understand this in the framework of life-tracks (Hundeide, 2005), is to argue that for the components of the lifestyle packages of the women to remain congruent, the presence of a committed relationship must bring with it parenthood. Here we see how the life-track is not simply a matter of the individual having certain expectations and wishes for their life, but also a matter of society more generally expecting certain things from the individual, and to such a degree that others feel comfortable assuming others desire parenthood. However, as described earlier, they all felt that the choice was ultimately their own and felt a kind of agency in shaping their lives, and in extension thereof life-tracks, depending on their own wishes.

Fertility and the right timing

All three women expressed concerns surrounding their future fertility, and for Karoline others’ expectations and assumptions were dependent upon the age that she had reached; others were expecting her to have children soon (Karoline, line 421). Marie, who is younger than the other informants, framed that: “I’m not old enough to be asked about it all the time” (Marie, line 791), and we can here see that she also understood age as a relevant factor in the expectations put on women to have children. Based on this, we can argue that

the women all felt certain external assumptions and expectations concerning the time frame of the progression of their life-tracks (Hundeide, 2005). Not only are these expectations towards the women present in their social world, but the women all expressed a certain awareness or even worry concerning their fertility and linked the timing of their intended childbearing to this. Louise expressed this as: “But I also know that at some point there will be a uh biological clock that at some point uh will announce its arrival” (Louise, line 35). We can then add to our understanding of life-tracks (Hundeide, 2005) as also situated in time; the women seem to feel a certain pressure to carry out the desire for parenthood before a certain time, otherwise they might risk not being able to do this at all. As such, we can argue that the life-tracks these women are born on, causes certain perceived limitations in their freedom to plan and construct their life-track if they are to fulfil their desire to have children. The following section will delve further into the women’s desire to become parents.

A deeper human connection

When asked to elaborate further concerning their desire to become parents, all the women referred to the wish for a connection with another human that they only felt could be achieved through parenthood; For Karoline this was expressed as:

That unconditional love that / that hopefully goes both ways ... that you love another person unconditionally / of course you can love a partner but ... I just think it's in a different way that you love a little uh ... person now I know how much I love my nephew and he ... of course he's my family but he's not mine ... so I'm really looking forward to feeling that and having ... a child who is someone who loves you ... in a very special way that no one else can (Karoline, line 197)

This longing for connection is mirrored in the accounts of the other women. As such, they imagined that their future lifestyle package (Hundeide, 2005), would include this type of connection with another human being, and looked forward to experiencing this. Furthermore,

as seen in Karoline's understanding of her relationship with her nephew, this sense of connection was only believed to be possible through parenthood.

The women all described a certain centrality of parenthood in their future lives, with the wish to become a parent outweighing for instance remaining in their dream career: "I have also had the thought that if I had to choose between this career and children then it would probably be the children that won" (Karoline, line 517). The wish to become a parent becomes a central thing around which the rest of the components of the life-track are structured. Due to this, a certain amount of life planning is needed to be able to achieve all the things that they want. Marie expressed that:

Right now I want to prioritize myself and my work and (...) that's also part of why it's not now as a 23-year-old but rather as a 28-year-old when / when I've had a little more opportunity to establish myself in what I want professionally and travel and all those things you also preferably have to do (Marie, line 92).

As such, Marie expressed a certain order in which she wished to do things; she had a desire to be able to prioritize herself and her wishes for the time being, so that she would be able to achieve certain things, and become established in her career, before becoming a parent. Therefore, planning is needed to ensure that all the desires for her future comes to fruition. The following section will dive into this aspect of life-planning, and the ways in which these women navigate this planning of the components of their life-tracks.

Life-planning – to have it all

The idea of planning the contents of the life-track to be able to "have it all" is expressed by the other women as well. Furthermore, as seen above, there is also a certain time aspect connected with the planning of the life-track; the women described fertility as a time sensitive potential barrier in their plan to have children, and as such was an obstacle that they had to account for when planning their life-tracks. The components of the life-track that

the women describe will shape the following sections, in which an exploration of how these women negotiate their life-tracks to attempt to “have it all” will be presented.

Relationship - a condition

All three women described the wish for parenthood as a deal-breaker when it came to choosing their partners, with Karoline expressing: “... it's also a dealbreaker for me in terms of finding a partner that ... if he doesn't want ... to have kids ever then ... I'm not going to be with him” (Karoline, line 53). Louise similarly expressed this, and then elaborated: “Now we're 25 and he's 26 uhm ... so it's also a bit like that / you also have to find someone now who has the sort of same wishes for the future as yourself” (Louise, line 415). As such, the choice of partner is heavily dependent upon the potential partners wish to have children. In Hundeide's (2005) framework, the choice of a partner can be viewed as a preparatory decision allowing them to plan their lives in accordance with their most central wishes. Karoline described how her career choice in the military set certain expectations and requirements for a future partner: “it also puts certain demands on the partner that I end up having that ... or that you are both in agreement with how it's going to work” (Karoline, line 498). With this, she is referencing that her job in the military entails time away from the home that her partner would have to cover. In the perspective of life-tracks (Hundeide, 2005), this as well can be viewed as a preparatory decision; when choosing her future partner, Karoline would have to be sure that they were compatible when it came to planning their everyday life. This is further demonstrated by the fact that, regardless of the importance of parenthood to her, she could not imagine doing it on her own:

Unless you make the choice to have children on your own which I don't want to do
(...) I want to share having a child with a partner ... it's not something I want to face
alone it's like / it's also a big part of it for me to ... make that choice with another
person (Karoline, line 465).

As we see here, the planning of the life-track is not as simple as finding a suitable partner to allow one the opportunity to become a parent, but the partner also becomes central in the experience of parenthood. This sentiment is mirrored by Louise as well, where she believed that childcaring would be easier with a partner (Louise, line 1386). Furthermore, Louise views the process of having children with someone as a declaration of love: "... but if you have a child together then you're just really tied to each other um so I really feel that it's also a declaration of love ...” (Louise, line 76). As such, the process of having children with someone can also be viewed as a step towards the type of relationship that they wish to have. As such, the planning of the life-track does not seem to be quite as straightforward as one could be inclined to believe. This is also seen in the way that the main priorities of the women might shift over the course of the life-track. For instance, Louise also wanted to stay with her partner forever, and expressed how once they become parents, it becomes important to also prioritize one another: “I just think it's important that we also remember each other and to also remember to do something good for each other and not just for the child” (Louise, line 984). As such, the desire for parenthood is a deal breaker when choosing a partner, but once this is achieved, it becomes important to also make room for maintaining and nurturing the relationship. We can view this as an interaction between the need for parenthood and the need for a good relationship; the prospect of parenthood might be central in choosing the partner, but the partner also becomes central in the experience of parenthood. This need to maintain the relationship is also expressed by the other women, where especially Marie expressed that even though the relationship could be pushed to the side in the beginning after having a child, it was important to her to then prioritize being able to maintain the relationship once they became parents (Marie, line 585;570).. This continued maintenance of the relationship and the prioritizing necessary to accomplish this, can in the perspective of life-tracks (Hundeide, 2005) be viewed as a series of decisions that the women must navigate

daily to remain on their life-track. As such, managing and planning the life-track can also be seen in these everyday decisions that the women must make in attempting to shape their life-track. This can also be viewed in the context of another important aspect in these women's life planning: the importance of family life to their life-track.

As briefly touched on, the women could not imagine becoming parents on their own and saw a relationship and someone to share the experience and burden of parenthood with, as central in planning their lives. As such, we can also view the choice of partner and the addition of children to their life-tracks as acts preparing for the family that they wished to create for themselves. For Louise parenthood and the type of relationship that this brought with it, was central in creating a family together. The following section will dive into this aspect of family as central to the planned life-track of the women.

Family – the ultimate purpose

The women all described an ideal family which in some ways followed a nuclear family ideal (Parke, 2013). Karoline herself commented on this, stating that her ideal family was quite traditional: “It is a very traditional view of ... of family / also the one that I have grown up with” (Karoline, line 277). She also explained how she understood family to be a place of belonging and linked this to unconditional love: “It’s probably that (...) unconditional love” (Karoline, line 239). After explaining her understanding of family and what a family was to her, Karoline was asked whether she thought this understanding of family affected her choice to have children and answered that: “... it's the kind of family I want to be a part of so it's definitely uh it plays into each other” (Karoline, line 262). As such, she described how having a family with a husband and children was central to her wish to become part of her ideal family, and as such these desires all affected one another. One way to understand this mutual influence of the wished-for components of the life-track (Hundeide, 2005), is to argue that perhaps the component of the life-track that is the most central to these

women is not parenthood, but to attain a certain type of family. The following section will explore another central component of the life-tracks of the women: their careers.

Career – progression and personal development

The women all had a certain number of things that they wanted to accomplish before having children, for instance in the case of Marie, who wanted to establish herself in her career before having children (Marie, line 92). Her younger age was one of the conditions that she believed would allow her to plan this, and she described how:

I'm a psychologist so there is the whole authorization and specialist and uh ... it doesn't stop but it goes significantly slower when you have children *laugh* where I then again with my age have the advantage that I can easily wait a little (Marie, line 110).

Based on this, the life-track again appears to not be a linear sequence of events but might more closely resemble a number of divided tracks which must all be congruent and allow space for one another, and thereby combine into one joint lifestyle package, in which the ideal family life takes place. For Marie, she can plan the timing of certain aspects of her career so that they fit in with her other wishes to for instance have children.

The women all described their careers as central in feeling a sort of personal and professional progression and development (e.g., Louise, line 595) and was not something that any of them planned on giving up once they become parents. However, the centrality and the way that they planned to organize their work life differed between the women. Marie explained how she viewed career as important to her, and that she also viewed it as a continuous learning process:

I don't think that I will reduce my working hours because I am very fond of my job and Have always been very kind of I need to have it all *laugh* like ... I need to learn to use myself and everything (Marie, line 304).

We can view career as a central component of the women's life-tracks; something that allows them to continuously develop and progress as individuals. Louise voiced a certain awareness of the difficulties in combining work and family life, and described how it needed a certain amount of planning for parenthood to not interfere with her career:

I think if you're at a point in your career where you feel it's all going well and you maybe get promoted soon and whatever and then suddenly have to put it aside for a whole year ... to be pregnant (Louise, line 646).

The other women also expressed this awareness of the potential difficulty in combining work life and their aspirations for parenthood and family life, but also all explained how they planned to navigate this to be able to include both in their lives. Marie explained how, despite career and parenthood being difficult to combine, her partners commitment to being present and sharing the burden of childrearing allows her to be able to maintain her career: “so it will probably be harder to get it all ... uh and then it's really practical with my partner who reduces his work hours so I that I can have it all *laugh*” (Marie, line 335). As such, we can argue that her choice in partner, and his wishes and aspirations, allows her to be able to structure her life-track according to her own wishes, for instance being able to combine a full-time job and parenthood. This can be seen as an example of the falling rigidity of life-tracks available to women (Hundeide, 2005; Bergqvist et al., 1999); career minded life-tracks are now both available to, and chosen by, the women included in this study. The challenge that remains however becomes to structure and plan their life-tracks to make room for the components that they wish to include. The following section will summarize our current understanding of how these women plan and navigate their life-track.

Negotiating the life-track

All the women interviewed in this study expressed an expectation of some challenges in combining work and family life, but also expressed confidence that they would be able

manage this. As such, the women were all conscious of the need to plan and structure their life-tracks to allow for all their aspirations to come to fruition. It becomes not a question of focusing on one thing at a time, but rather becomes almost like composing music; the tracks must all progress simultaneously, some might fade into the background to allow for others to dominate at certain times, allowing for all the important components to be maintained and performed satisfactorily. To understand the way that these women navigate and understand their life-tracks, it becomes necessary to expand on Hundede's (2005) theoretical framework, and view the components of the lifestyle package, as being accompanied by a smaller track, which together make up the life-track. Each track must progress individually to be able to contribute to the life-track in the right way. As such, a simpler view of the life-track does not allow us to for instance understand how Marie's wish to focus on achieving milestones in her both her career and romantic relationship before having children, interacts with one another to shape the life-track that she envisions for herself. Here, a view of her career, relationship, and prospect of parenthood as complimentary tracks each enabling the others, better describes how the women express their negotiation and navigation of their life-tracks. The following sections will utilize further aspects of Hundede's (2005) framework, to better understand the conditions that the women have for shaping their life-track.

Opportunity situations

One thing that shapes the life-track of the individual, is the opportunity situations that they find themselves in, though which their perceived options allow them to shape their life-track (Hundede, 2005). Exploring how the three women navigate opportunity situations in their lives might further help us understand their choice to become parents. This section will dive into a few of the opportunity situations concerning parenthood that the women have or will find themselves in, and how they navigate and perceive these.

Parenthood – childbearing or other options?

One condition of their future parenthood that most of the women expressed was central to their understanding of becoming parents, was the significance of experiencing pregnancy. Karoline described how childbearing was central in her desire to become a parent and that she could not imagine adopting:

I think the feeling at least the idea **before** for me is different too / but it's also because being pregnant is such a big part of / of what I want ... so I can't imagine not going to be pregnant ... um and it's not something I've really processed very much like said to myself like what if you can't get pregnant? How does that affect your thoughts about becoming a parent? Um ... it's something I don't really think about because I just assume that I can (Karoline, line 850).

If we are to understand Karoline's position in the context of opportunity situations (Hundeide, 2005), one thing becomes apparent; only one congruent option is perceived by Karoline. She views childbearing as the only option to become a parent in the way that she desires. She mentions adoption, but also explains that not being able to bear children might affect her decision to such a degree that she might not make the same choice. As such, she is aware that other options are available to her, but they would not be congruent with the life-track that she desires. In the framework of life-tracks (Hundeide, 2005), pregnancy becomes such a vital move in the way that she navigates her life-track, that she does not want to consider other options. Karoline links her deep-seated desire to experience pregnancy with the previously described longing for connection: "I think again it's that emotional thing of making a connection with something you've never seen or met" (Karoline, line 578). Based on this, we can argue that despite risking a setback in her career following childbearing (Karoline, line 671), Karoline does not perceive other congruent options available to her, if she is to experience the type of connection with her future child that she wants.

Marie similarly expressed a certain importance of childbearing in her perception of parenthood:

I think if I can't have children / there's also a risk of that then I don't know if I would adopt instead (...) so in that way it could end up happening that uh (...) something like that with adoption and something like that it's only something that really comes up when ... for me when I know that I can't have children (...) for me it's part of motherhood like all of it and ... and that it's my child and it's my partner's child (Marie, excerpts lines 459-469).

To Marie, adoption becomes a sort of back-up option that she will not consider until faced with the choice. Similar to Karoline, adoption is an available, but not congruent, option for Marie in her current position. However, this might change if she is not able to bear children, and she might then find herself in a new opportunity situation: one in which she would either have to make congruent the previously incongruent option of adoption, or dramatically change her life-track to one in which she does not become a parent.

A joint effort?

Another opportunity situation which the women had all either found themselves in already, or was still experiencing, was the prospect of choosing a partner. As described earlier, not wanting to become a parent was a dealbreaker for the women when choosing a partner. Karoline was at the time of the interview still searching for a partner and expressed how this affected her dating process: “it's something you have to ask about a little early in a relationship because when you reach this age you don't want to waste your time” (Karoline, line 77). In Hundeide's (2005) theoretical framework, we can view the choice of pursuing a relationship with a potential partner as an opportunity situation in which the women are forced to take in account their preferred and desired life-track. Especially Karoline was conscious of this, given her current search for a partner, but also Louise expressed this: “We

had that conversation actually quite early on I think when we started seeing each other ... Because I believe (...) you shouldn't force a child on someone" (Louise, line 409). To Louise, not only were her own wish important when considering a potential partner, but it was also important to her not to pressure anyone to have children. As such, she not only had to consider her own desired life-track but had to find a partner with whom the ultimate goals in life aligned. In the context of opportunity situations (Hundeide, 2005) we can add to our understanding of partner choice as an opportunity situation by also adding that in the case of Louise, the option of finding a partner who might not necessarily desire parenthood for themselves, but was willing to compromise for her sake, was an available option to pursue, but not one that was congruent with her wishes when it came to the life-track that she envisioned. This is in line with the previous understanding of a certain type of family life being important to Louise, and we can here view the choice of partner as central in facilitating this.

In line with this, none of the women could imagine becoming parents on their own, to be so called single parents. As described previously, they all wanted to be with a partner and create a certain type of family in which parenthood would take place. As such, regardless of the centrality in their life of future parenthood, doing so alone was not something that any of the women could imagine. One way to view this in the framework of opportunity situations and life-tracks, is that to enable them to achieve all the components of the life-track that they wished for, for instance career or a certain type of family life, they would need to make the right decisions when shaping their life-track early on. Karoline had wanted to have children earlier, but now had to accept that this would have to wait until a suitable partner was found, having children by use of for instance sperm donor was not an option that is congruent with her desired life-track. As such, single parenting is an option that the women know is available to them, but not one that any of them believed congruent with the life-track that they wanted.

We can argue that despite the innate desire to become parents, the women were not willing to achieve this at all costs. The idea of belonging in a certain family life might be more central than their desire to become parents. They want to become parents, but want to achieve this in a specific context, and therefore when faced with opportunity situations might not perceive alternative choices as afforded to them, and especially not given the life-track that they wish to be on. As such, it is not simply a question of wanting a specific thing for themselves, but a question of negotiating their options to achieve the life-track that they desire.

Access skills

As described by Hundeide (2005) one way to understand what enables individuals to make certain decisions when faced with opportunity situations, and thereby continue along or change their life-track, is through the concept of access skills. The following section aims to further expand our understanding of these women's decision to become parents, by how they understand their own access to the life-tracks that they desire (Hundeide, 2005).

Caregiving

Karoline described how she felt confident that caring for a child and being a parent will come naturally to her. When asked how she believed parenthood would affect her, she answered: "So I think it's kind of a rollercoaster ride but overall I think I'm actually going to feel that uh ... like gain some confidence in it just because I believe that it's something that comes naturally" (Karoline, line 706). As such, she expresses a belief in a sort of innate ability to care for children. This innate ability to manage childcare can be understood in Hundeide's (2005) framework, by viewing this as an access skill perceived by Karoline that enables her to access the life-track that she wants to be on. By believing that she will naturally be able to care for her children, she can continue along her life-track without having to question her own ability to be a parent. Furthermore, Karoline also expressed how she wanted to pass on the upbringing that her parents had given her: "the support and care that I

have received from my parents I view as a good example for how I would also like to raise my children and I would like to be able to pass that on” (Karoline, line 759). We can argue that she understands her upbringing to have supplied her with an access skill that she deems important in caring for her own children. As such, this understanding of Karolines own upbringing as an access skill adds to our understanding of how she navigates her life-track; not only is her access to the life-track that she desires determined by the choices she has made, but also by other circumstances that have shaped her, in this case her upbringing, giving her the skills that she perceives as central to performing in her chosen life-track.

Marie also expressed this natural ability to care for children: “it comes naturally to me to have the role of responsibility and to click well with children” (Marie, line 45)¹. Louise did not in the same way express this, but did explain how she believed that the process of childbearing would give her a unique connection with the child:

So because of that there is just a completely different connection between mother and child for the first while ... and therefore I also think there will be some kind of natural process that maybe it will be the mother that goes first when the child cries (Louise, line 963).

One way to understand this, is to argue that Louise expects childbearing to give her certain access skills (Hundeide, 2005); she will be able to care for her child because the process of childbearing provides the prerequisite connection and, in extension thereof, skills needed as a parent. This can be linked to how it was previously described that none of the women viewed adoption as an option when it came to fulfilling their dream of parenthood; we can argue that the women, and especially Louise, might understand childbearing to be essential in acquiring the necessary access skills to remain on their life-track. This might further explain how, when

¹ “Click well” was translated from the Danish “klik godt.” Other translations could be to “hit it off” or “get on with.”

faced with the opportunity situation (Hundeide, 2005) the women do not perceive adoption to be a congruent possibility for them. As such, we can argue that they might believe that childbearing will enable them to become better parents or put in Hundeide's (2005) terms, acquire a new access skill, and therefore is a necessity to be able to experience parenthood in a way that is congruent with their life-track.

Planning skills

Another potential access skill of the women included in the study, is the ability to plan and structure their life-tracks. This is not an ability that the women explicitly expressed, but instead a sort of assumed possibility for them. When explaining their expected time frame for their careers, parenthood, family life and other things, there was an underlying assumption that they had a certain autonomy in deciding when certain things took place. One place in which this can be seen is in the case of being able to establish themselves in their careers before becoming parents as described previously. As such, a potential access skill of the women is that of planning the life-track, and in turn being able to structure it in a way where they can decide which components dominate at certain times, and thereby be able to achieve all the things that they strive for: a good relationship, parenthood, a certain type of family life, etc. If they were not confident in their ability to plan their life-track, they might not be as confident that they are able to "have it all."

When asked what they thought the reason was for the change in the statistics concerning highly educated women and childbearing in recent years, the women all in one way or another mentioned resources as a potential reason. Louise described how:

I don't know if it's because they feel they have the resources to pass it on (...)well I just think they're resourceful and so therefore it's possible (Louise, line 691)

We can argue that the women believe that the stability and resourcefulness that come with being highly educated might act as a type of access skill, making it possible for them to make

the choice to have children, and to raise these children in an environment that they believe is suitable. As such, their high level of education allows these women to believe that they can provide the high standard of childrearing that they describe. Along this line, Marie described how: “It’s easy to have children in the Nordics right, because you get grants from the state...” (Marie, line 12689). Here, Marie brings into play the societal context in which the women reside.

Sociocultural context in the Nordics

Awareness of their sociocultural context is not something that is mentioned explicitly often but is also expressed in the ways that the women describe their expectations concerning for instance parental leave. We can relate this to the previously describe societal changes seen for women in the Nordic countries in recent history. We can argue that the structural changes seen in the Nordics might support women’s freedom in choosing the life-track that they wish for, and that is in some ways demanded of them, for instance seen in the shift into a dual-income model (Bergqvist et al., 1999). However, to then support these life-tracks, the state in turn ensures that certain things, such as childcare, is supported by government subsidies and grants (Bergqvist et al., 1999). In the terms of Hundeide (2005), we can say that the sociocultural context that these women reside in allows for a wider array of life-tracks, but still enforces certain things. They all express a wish to have a career, and as such the pressure that they potentially feel might be similar to the case of parenthood: they experience that their own wishes are in line with the societal pressure experienced.

An interesting point here becomes that Karoline might not feel this pressure to have a career. When asked why she thought highly educated women were no longer less likely to have children, she answered: “in spite (...) no I don't know because ... hmm because you have always been told that ... you have to choose between / as a woman / between career and children” (Karoline, line 546). Based on this, we might argue that it is not simply a question

of structural changes pressuring women to have careers in general, but rather a question of the type of career that they are expected to maintain to support the household financially. This becomes increasingly interesting given how Karoline previously described how childbearing might affect her career negatively, to which she also explained how she didn't believe that a man in her position would have the same considerations and concerns as her:

I don't think they ... think as much about the consequences for **them** of having ... of having a child because they can / well of course it's also going to affect their working life but ... but they don't put their career on hold for ... well practically two years (Karoline, line 659).

Based on this, it might not be so much a question of whether women can maintain both a career and parenthood, but an assumption that women are less able to succeed in certain career types, given the consequences of childbearing and -care might have on their career and ability to hold certain occupations. Karolines take on the change in childbearing trends becomes interesting; perhaps we can view her idea of women reacting in spite because they have always been told that they would have to choose between parenthood and a career, as an example of the agency that these women experience, as well as an example of the previously described increasing pressure on the individual to master and shape their own life-track (Hundeide, 2005). In this line of thinking, the women might be less affected by the societal pressure put on women to choose between the two because of a sense of certainty that they are able to shape their life-track based on their own wishes. It is their life-track to master and therefore it is theirs to shape as well, regardless of what they are told by others.

Conclusion

This study aimed to explore how highly educated women understand their own decision to become parents. One central aspect of the women's wishes to have children, appeared to be the yearning to be a part of a specific type of family, and to experience a

certain type of belonging and connection to other humans that they couldn't imagine living without. To achieve this, the women were aware that they would have to plan their lives accordingly, and in Hundeide's (2005) terms, negotiate the components of their life-tracks to be able to achieve the things in life that they aspired to. In the understanding presented in this study, the women's negotiation of their life-track is understood in terms of several intertwining tracks in different spheres of the life which would all have to give way for each other at certain times in the women's lives. Each track had its own milestones and aspirations attached to it, for instance in the case of Karoline, who wanted to achieve certain things in her professional career, but also wanted to reach certain milestones in a potential romantic relationship, before becoming a parent. To permit this, certain components of the life-track would have to be more salient at certain times in her life.

Recent years has seen a dramatic change in the ways that Nordic women can engage in different spheres of their social world; the women in this study showed awareness of an increased freedom in their sociocultural context, which allowed them to shape and construct the life-tracks that they desired for themselves. They all described rather high aspirations for the ways in which their family life would play out, and in the case of Marie, it became a question of creating ideal conditions for growth for both her and her family. It appeared to also be a question of creating the conditions for a sort of ultimate connection and belonging, that the women did not believe could be achieved in any other way. We might here comment on the fragility of the ideal that the women strive to achieve; if one component of their life-track does not turn out according to their aspirations, they might be at risk of not being able to achieve the life that they are working hard to attain.

The women all described how they attempted to construct their life-tracks in a way that permitted a rather traditional modern family structure. We might argue that this family structure falls within the category of a modern nuclear family (Parke, 2013). None of the

women could imagine solo parenting and instead were confident that they could structure the components in their life in such a way that this would not be necessary. Furthermore, the women explained awareness of the difficulty of combining work and family life but did not describe any alternatives for themselves. We might here question whether societies' perceptions of the traditional nuclear family ideal have evolved along with social policy? One way to understand the high aspirations of these women might be to view their perceived options in achieving the belonging and connection that they desired because of high cultural expectations as to what constitutes the ideal human connection. As such, they would have to follow a rather specific life-track to be able to achieve all the things important to them and did not believe that they could achieve this type of connection any other way. As Hundeide (2005) pointed out, in modern society it becomes the responsibility of the individual to master their life-track, and these women seemed confident that they could manage this. They all seemed confident that they possessed, or would develop, the skills needed to create their ideal family life, such as caregiving and the ability to create economic security, but also to plan their lives in a manner allowing them to include all the components of the life-track that they desired. One way to understand this could be that these women had previously experienced success in meeting and adjusting to the demands in other spheres of their life, and as a result possessed a certain confidence that they would be able to achieve this when facing the prospect of building their ideal life. Despite the lessened rigidity in choosing life-tracks (Hundeide, 2005), the women all described a pressure to construct their life-tracks in a very specific way. The goal for them is not simply to experience parenthood, but rather to experience this in a specific context.

References

- Andersson, G., Rønsen, M., Knudsen, L. B., Lappegård, T., Neyer, G., Skrede, K., Teschner, K., & Vikat, A. (2009). Cohort Fertility Patterns in the Nordic Countries. *Demographic Research*, 20, 313–352. <https://doi.org/10.4054/demres.2009.20.14>
- Petersen, K., Sylvest, R., Nyboe Andersen, A., Pinborg, A., Westring Hvidman, H., & Schmidt, L. (2016). Attitudes towards family formation in cohabiting and single childless women in their mid- to late thirties. *Human Fertility*, 19(1), 48–55. <https://doi.org/10.3109/14647273.2016.1156171>
- Bergqvist, C. et al. (1999). *Equal democracies?: gender and politics in the Nordic countries*. Scandinavian University Press.
- Boivin, J., Buntin, L., Kalebic, N., & Harrison, C. (2018). What makes people ready to conceive? Findings from the International Fertility Decision-Making Study. *Reproductive Biomedicine & Society Online*, 6, 90–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rbms.2018.10.012>
- Danish Health Authority [Sundhedsstyrelsen], (2019, May). *Contraceptives and abortion*. [Prævention og abort]. Retrieved March 25th 2022, from: <https://www.sst.dk/da/Viden/Graviditet-og-foedsel/Praevention-og-abort>
- Danish Ministry of Employment [Beskæftigelsesministeriet]. (n.d.). *Ny orlovsmode - øremærket orlov [New leave model – earmarked leave]*. Bm.dk. Retrieved May 29th 2022, from: <https://bm.dk/arbejdsomraader/aktuelle-fokusomraader/ny-orlovsmode-oeremaerket-orlov/>
- Eriksson, C., Larsson, M., & Tydén, T. (2012). Reflections on having children in the future- interviews with highly educated women and men without children. *Upsala Journal of Medical Sciences*, 117(3), 328–335. <https://doi.org/10.3109/03009734.2012.654862>

- Galletta, A. (2013). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication*. New York University Press.
- Ganle, J. K., Apolot, R. R., Rugoho, T., & Sumankuuro, J. (2020). “They are my future”: childbearing desires and motivations among women with disabilities in Ghana - implications for reproductive healthcare. *Reproductive Health, 17(1)*, 151.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-020-01000-y>
- Hundeide, K. (2005). Socio-cultural Tracks of Development, Opportunity Situations and Access Skills. *Culture & Psychology, 11(2)*, 241–261.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X05052353>
- Jalovaara, M., Neyer, G., Andersson, G., Dahlberg, J., Dommermuth, L., Fallesen, P., & Lappegård, T. (2018). Education, Gender, and Cohort Fertility in the Nordic Countries. *European Journal of Population, 35(3)*, 563–586. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-018-9492-2>
- Lampic, C., Svanberg, A. S., Karlström, P., & Tydén, T. (2006). Fertility awareness, intentions concerning childbearing, and attitudes towards parenthood among female and male academics. *Human Reproduction (Oxford), 21(2)*, 558–564.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dei367>
- Langdridge, D., Sheeran, P., & Connolly, K. (2005). Understanding the reasons for parenthood. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology, 23(2)*, 121–133.
- Miettinen, A., Rotkirch, A., Szalma, I., Donno, A., & Tanturri, M.-L. (2015). Increasing childlessness in Europe: time trends and country differences. *Families and Societies, 33*. Retrieved May 29th 2022, from: <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/WP33MiettinenEtAl2015.pdf>
- Mortensen, L., Hegaard, H. K., Andersen, A. N., & Bentzen, J. G. (2012). Attitudes towards motherhood and fertility awareness among 20-40-year-old female healthcare

- professionals. *The European Journal of Contraception & Reproductive Health Care*, 17(6), 468–481. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13625187.2012.728015>
- Parke, R. (2013). *Future families diverse forms, rich possibilities*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Russel, H. (2015, September 14). “There’s no stigma”: why so many Danish women are opting to become single mothers. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/sep/14/no-stigma-single-mothers-denmark-solomors>
- Smith, N. (2012). Kvinders økonomiske bidrag til velfærdsstaten [Women’s financial contribution to the welfare state]. In De Økonomiske Råd [The Economic Council]. *Jubilæumsskrift - De Økonomiske Råd: 1962-2012* [Anniversary writing – *The Economic Council: 1962-2012*]. De Økonomiske Råd; Albertslund.
- Sobotka, T. (2017) Childlessness in Europe: Reconstructing Long-Term Trends Among Women Born in 1900–1972. In: Kreyenfeld M., Konietzka D. (eds) *Childlessness in Europe: Contexts, Causes, and Consequences. Demographic Research Monographs (A series of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research)*. Springer, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-44667-7_2
- Statistics Denmark. [Danmarks statistik]. (2020, December). *Mænd og familier 2020*. [Men and families 2020]. Retrieved February 22nd, 2022, from
<https://www.dst.dk/Site/Dst/Udgivelser/GetPubFile.aspx?id=41883&sid=manfam2020>
- Volgsten, H., & Schmidt, L. (2021). Exploring Swedish single women’s decision to choose motherhood through medically assisted reproduction – a qualitative study. *Human Fertility*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647273.2021.2017026>

Discussion

The research article presented on the previous pages of this thesis can give rise to a variety of methodological concerns and questions. The following sections discuss the theoretical and methodological approach employed in the effort to answer the research question of this thesis: How do young women with higher levels of education understand their decision to become parents in the future?

Methods employed in the study

This qualitative study carried out to explore the decision of highly educated women to have children, used semi-structured interviews to access the experiences of the women of interest. The use of this data collection method comes with both ethical and methodological risks that the researcher must be aware of, in an effort to produce high quality research and to protect the informants of the study (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2015).

One central way to try to ensure the quality of a qualitative study, is to remain transparent in the description of the methods and reasoning behind the study (Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2022). In this thesis, this is sought done through rigorous descriptions of the methods employed to collect data. Furthermore, the reasoning and argumentation is presented throughout the sections detailing the methodological underpinnings of this study, in an effort to allow the reader access to the thoughts and foundations upon which methodological choices have been made. Additionally, a variety of the materials used for the interviews are available in the appendix, allowing the reader insight into for instance the consent forms presented to the participants. This ensures transparency in the conditions that the informants participated based on. One aspect of this thesis where transparency is central, is in the inclusion of the original Danish transcripts in the appendices. This allows the reader the option of viewing the untranslated wordings of the informants. This furthermore allows a clear reference to each quote referred to in the study.

The semi-structured interview

This study employed a qualitative semi-structured interview to access the experiences and understandings of the participants. Here we can discuss the appropriateness of the semi-structured interview in answering the research question of this thesis.. As described in the introductory sections of this thesis, a large portion of the existing research into similar fields has largely utilized quantitative methods, for instance large scale surveys, and have therefore not been able to explore this subject in depth. As such, this study has contributed to the existing body of research by employing a research approach which allowed the initial thoughts of the participants to also be included and has allowed for an in-depth exploration of the experiences of the specific women. This is not to say that large scale surveys are not useful, but the focus of these appear remarkably different from the focus of this study, and as such would not be an appropriate method in answering the research question of this thesis. This difference in focus might be partly due to the different professional groups conducting the research; a large part of the existing literature concerning childbearing and parenthood has been conducted by health care providers such as medical doctors or nurses, and as such has not had a psychological focus (Eriksson et al., 2012; Lampic et al., 2006). This thesis hopes to contribute to the literature by employing a psychological focus in understanding the processes and conditions affecting the individual, when making this choice. The use of a qualitative methodology gives rise to a number of concerns, one such concern is the risk of bias related to the participants.

Self-selection bias

Self-selection in this context refers to the risk that the participants in a given study might possess certain attributes, and as a result thereof have chosen to participate in the study (Robinson, 2014). Because of this, it is important to remain aware of the context in which the reported findings must be viewed (Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2022). In this study, the topic of

childbearing can, for some, be a sensitive subject to approach. Others might not be confident in the reasoning behind their choice, or simply do not feel strongly that parenthood is central to them, and rather is just a part of life that they would rather not have questioned. As such, the centrality of childbearing and the strongness of the desire in the women might not generally be the case for women in similar positions. As such, it is important here to be aware of the potential reasons behind the participation of the informants in the study (Robinson, 2014). This is not to say that the contribution of the participants is any less valuable given the risk of bias, but simply that we, as researchers, must be cautious in drawing more general conclusions concerning all highly educated women, and rather must be aware that certain contextual conditions might have caused these specific women to volunteer for participation. For instance, the women who participated in this study might all feel a strong desire to have children, and be very confident in this decision, and we must therefore be aware that not all highly educated women who have decided to have children in the future necessarily experience this or understand it in the same way. Based on this, we must be cautious in generalizing the results of this study, and instead recognize that the findings allow us to explore the understandings of these three specific women and their sociocultural conditions. This is especially relevant given the universal access to high levels of education in Denmark, and the as a result thereof, widely varying sociocultural contexts that highly educated women in Denmark might come from and be situated in.

Furthermore, the study did not exclude women on the grounds of for instance sexual orientation or relationship status, but the final participants in the interviews set certain limitations for the generalizability of the findings. All the participants were involved in a heterosexual relationship, either in a committed relationship or by dating, and desired a traditional family structure. As such, this study is not capable of giving insight into potential similarities or differences between different types of family formation. Once again, this

requires that we must be cautious in generalizing the findings, and instead aim to understand these specific women's experiences and understandings.

Conducting the interviews

When creating the interview protocol, and conducting the interviews, one concern arose concerning the risk of influencing the participants when asking certain questions. The question of why individuals wanted to have children in the future seems almost taboo, and as such an awareness arose concerning the risk of insulting or making the participants uncomfortable when asking questions concerning this. Therefore, a gentle approach in the interview protocol was chosen, where the question of what reasons the decision was based on was saved for a later time where confidentiality was established (Galletta, 2013).

Furthermore, as described by Flick (2007), certain statements made by interviewees must be seen in relation to the potential effect that the given context might have on the individual's descriptions. This is not to say that the interviewee is attempting to misguide or consciously altering their explanations, but rather that certain things might not be experienced as socially appropriate in a given situation (Flick, 2007). As such, we must also in this study be aware that certain descriptions and experiences might not have been shared by the women participating, and that they might have felt a certain pressure to perform in a specific way to construct a desirable version of their understandings. This is not to argue that the findings of this study suddenly become obsolete due to the risk of biased statements, but rather can be seen as a tool in further exploring the experiences of the women. This can for instance be seen in the way that the women described the societal and social pressure that they experienced; both Louise and Karoline at first stated that they felt no pressure to have children, but as the interviews progressed clarified this, and explained that they did experience a certain amount of pressure, but that they also believed that this was in line with their own desire and therefore did not necessarily believe that this societal pressure affected

them. One way to view this change in expressed perception, is to argue that perhaps the women felt a certain pressure in the context of the interview to remain autonomous and not be affected by social pressure, and therefore were quick to dismiss this when asked about it. It is not an easy feat to attempt to differentiate potential context specific effects on the accounts of the women. An awareness of this might help us remain curious and explorative in our approach to understanding the accounts of the three women, and thereby reflect on the potential consequences that the interview situation might also have had on the findings presented in the study (Galletta, 2013).

Researcher bias – addressing the findings

Another central methodological concern that must be addressed in this thesis, is the risk of bias that I as a researcher carry. Given the similarity to the demographic group under investigation, it becomes crucial to take precautions and remain continuously aware of the effect that my preexisting assumptions might have on the findings of this study. One way that this was sought handled is with both supervisor and peer discussion in attempting to ensure that the conclusions and reasoning of this study are not the result of my own assumptions surrounding this topic. As described by Flick (2007), meeting with peers who are not directly involved in the study being conducted can help the researcher become aware of potential blind spots. Throughout the research process, peer discussion has been a central element in both the initial phases of planning and carrying out this study, as well as the following analysis of the findings. In-depth discussions with peers conducting similar studies, has allowed me to question the decisions made throughout the process, and thereby attempt to minimize the risk of my own bias affecting the findings of the study. My supervisor has been drawn into all major methodological decision making and has continuously discussed and challenged my findings in order to ensure diligence in allowing the findings to be guided by the experiences and understandings described by the women informing this study.

Additionally, the attempt to follow a stringent theoretical approach in the data analysis has given focus to the work with the data, and I have in this way tried to remove my own assumptions as much as possible from the analysis, in order to let the voices of the women carry the analysis. As described in the methods section of this thesis, the preexisting assumptions that I entered this project with might also be viewed as a strength in guiding and forming the interest which shaped the research question. Therefore, it becomes a balancing act of allowing a genuine interest to fuel the initial phases of constructing the study but then being cautious to not let these inappropriately affect the resulting findings and conclusions. By following the theoretical framework proposed by Hundeide (2005), this study aims to add to an existing basis of understanding how sociocultural contexts shape and influence decision making in individuals. As described by Tanggaard and Brinkmann (2022), one central aspect of ensuring the quality of qualitative research is by making clear what the focus of the investigation is, and the reasoning behind this focus. As they argue, one way to adhere to a focus in the study, is by utilizing and reflecting on relevant theoretical perspectives. By doing this, the researcher ensures a clear focus and aim for the investigation, as the study is otherwise at risk of not finding anything at all (Tanggaard & Brinkmann, 2022). Based on this, this study has aimed to maintain a clear focus on the understandings of decision-making expressed by the women, in relations to the life track framework presented by Hundeide (2005). This did at times prove difficult, as the complexity of this choice can often be difficult to describe in simpler terms. However, to attempt to remedy this, a clear and transparent description of the processes leading to certain conclusions was strived for. The following section will expand on the discussion of the use of Hundeide's (2005) framework.

The theoretical approach utilized in the article

As described above, the use of a theoretical perspective in this thesis allows us to better focus on certain aspects of the experience of the women who inform this study. In this

thesis, the use of Hundeide's framework has allowed us to focus on achieving a deeper understanding of how the three women understand and negotiate the decision they have made to have children in the future, and how this affects, and is affected by, other components of their life-tracks. However, as a result of this focus of the study, certain aspects of the experience of the women were left unexplored, as a result of the focus on life tracks and decision making. This is not necessarily an issue, as the research question guiding this thesis concerns the women's understandings of their decision. Rather, it becomes clear that there are certain limitations in utilizing this framework when exploring the subject of this study. Relevant to mention here, is that certain aspects of the theoretical framework were highly useful in understanding for instance the perceived access skills of the women. The following sections will discuss some of the limitations and concerns in using this theoretical approach in this study.

The original focus of the theoretical framework – marginalized youth

As described in the sections describing Hundeide's (2005;2004) theoretical framework, this theoretical understanding of decision making was developed largely in the context of supporting and understanding marginalized youth, for instance in neo-Nazi groups, or impoverished youths attempts at making a living for themselves. As such, Hundeide (2004) largely works with the future life tracks of individuals, and how to support them in gaining access to certain life tracks. In the use of the theoretical framework employed in this study, the focus is on women who have already, at least partly, established themselves on certain life tracks, and have already achieved some of the milestones that they strived for as components of their life tracks. As such, this thesis is not an exploration of how to support individuals moving to different life tracks, rather it uses the framework in aiming to understand how these women negotiate and understand the decision to have children in the future, and the resulting life tracks that they are managing. As such, the goal is not to cause

change, but rather to understand the sociocultural contexts and conditions surrounding a potentially taken for granted aspect of life. Thereby only certain aspects of Hundeide's (2005) framework become central in creating this understanding, however this framework has allowed an interesting understanding of these women's decision making to be uncovered. Despite not necessarily being the intended use for this theory, the use of it in this context has guided an analysis which has allowed for an exploration of the processes and understandings on which these women have made their decisions. Furthermore, it has allowed us to view childbearing in the wider context of constructing life tracks which contain all of the desired components that they women strive for. The following section will focus on the way in which the theory has been expanded to better understand the women informing this study.

The life track as a series of smaller tracks

Another limitation in using the theoretical framework of life tracks is the way in which the life course is described as a single sociocultural track of development (Hundeide, 2005). This is not necessarily incompatible with the idea presented in this thesis but might point towards the difference between the demographic group that Hundeide (2005) focuses on, and the group explored in this study. This expansion of the theoretical framework does not contradict the descriptions by Hundeide (2005), but rather builds upon the notions and concepts presented to understand the complex life tracks of the women informing the study. This is not to say that this approach is necessarily problematic, but it is important to be aware of not altering the theoretical perspective due to the researchers' own biases, and rather that this expansion is a result of the descriptions of the informants. As such, it becomes a balance of respecting the theoretical framework, while simultaneously utilizing this perspective fully in developing an understanding of the life tracks of the three women. The theory has been useful in furthering our understanding of the conditions which inform the women's decisions to become parents in the future, and as such has allowed a deeper investigation of the

processed involved for these three women. Caution must however be shown in assuming that this theoretical framework is also fitting when working with other demographic groups, as it has not been within the scope of this study to compare the life tracks of individuals positioned in a variety of sociocultural contexts.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the qualitative study presented in the article sections of this thesis, as well as the following discussion surrounding the theoretical and methodological approach utilised in exploring the experiences of the three women, we can now further conclude on the research question. As described in the article, in order to seek a thorough and in-depth exploration of the understandings of the three women informing this thesis, Hundeide's (2005) theoretical framework was expanded on. The existing notions of the life-track, access skills and opportunity situations have been useful in understanding the processes involved in the decision making of the highly educated women, when choosing parenthood. Throughout the analysis, it became clear that the life tracks of the women appeared to be a combination of smaller tracks associated with the different components that they desired in their lifestyle packages. These smaller tracks identified in this thesis all appeared to interact in a way that would allow the women to create the family life that they desire. As such, the planning of the life track appears central in enabling the women to include all of the components in their life-tracks, and the previous positive experiences of the women being proficient in their professions or schooling, might play a part in their confidence that they would be able to meet the demands needed to accomplish this life-track. The women all had distinct and specific demands to the characteristics of their future family life, and one concern raised in the study is the potential fragility of this aspiration. The findings of the study are in line with previous research, for instance by Eriksson and colleagues (2012), in the understanding that these women all desired parenthood deeply, and saw it as central in

forming a family, while also being aware of social pressure. The findings of this study are also in line with the findings of Peterson and colleagues (2016), by indicating the existence of a nuclear family ideal. This study has expanded on this, and it has become apparent that the informants were willing to work hard to achieve their aspirations and knew that planning was central in this endeavour.

This thesis raises the concern of different bias that it might be liable to. It here becomes central to remain aware of for instance potential bias related to the participants, as women who fit the inclusion criteria, but for example are not as confident in their own life planning abilities or their decision to have children in the future, might not be inclined to participate in interviews concerning their decision. As such, it becomes important to remain aware that this thesis has allowed us an insight into the understandings and experiences of the women interviewed, but that these findings might not be applicable to women in different contexts than the three women who participated in this study. Furthermore, this thesis has not attempted to utilize the framework of life tracks in exploring other demographic groups, and as such this theoretical approach might not be as useful in other contexts. However, in the exploration of highly educated women's understandings of their decision to have children, it has supplied us with the theoretical conception and notion needed to create an understanding of these women that considers both their sociocultural context, as well as their own perceived options and limitations in shaping the life track that they wish for. It has become clear that the question for these women is not whether they are able to include both career, relationships, and parenthood in their life-tracks. Rather, it becomes a question of how to manage their life-tracks in a way that enables them to progress and maintain it all; to achieve all their aspirations while simultaneously performing these to meet their ambitious standards.

Future research

The findings and following analysis of this thesis has focused on the decision of the highly educated women participating in the interviews to become parents in the future and has explored this by use of the theoretical concepts presented by Hundeide (2005). However, certain central aspects of the women's experience, such as the need for connection and belonging, was not further explored in this thesis. It is here argued that if we are to fully understand the decision-making of these women, it is also central to understand this need. It is not within the scope of this thesis, but the understandings presented in this study might benefit from a deeper exploration of the ways in which the women understand the parent-child connection that they all strive to experience. This is for instance interesting given their worry that this connection could only be experienced in a very specific context, and that for instance adoption would not allow them the same experience. This is also interesting in relation to the structural and societal changes seen in Nordic societies in recent years, where we might argue that these changes could influence how the women view and understand human connection.

References

- Andersson, G., Rønsen, M., Knudsen, L. B., Lappegård, T., Neyer, G., Skrede, K., Teschner, K., & Vikat, A. (2009). Cohort Fertility Patterns in the Nordic Countries. *Demographic Research*, 20, 313–352. <https://doi.org/10.4054/demres.2009.20.14>
- Bergqvist, C. et al. (1999). *Equal democracies?: gender and politics in the Nordic countries*. Scandinavian University Press.
- Boivin, J., Buntin, L., Kalebic, N., & Harrison, C. (2018). What makes people ready to conceive? Findings from the International Fertility Decision-Making Study. *Reproductive Biomedicine & Society Online*, 6, 90–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rbms.2018.10.012>
- Brinkmann, S. (2015). Etik i en kvalitativ verden [Ethics in a qualitative world]. In S. Brinkmann & L. Tanggaard, (Red.), *Kvalitative Metoder: en grundbog [Qualitative methods: a handbook]*. Hans Reitzels Forlag
- Cambridge Dictionary. (2020, February 5). *SOCIOCULTURAL* | meaning in the Cambridge English Dictionary. Cambridge.org. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/sociocultural>
- Danish Health Authority [Sundhedsstyrelsen], (2019, May). *Contraceptives and abortion. [Prævention og abort]*. Retrieved March 25th 2022, from:
- Danish Ministry of Employment [Beskæftigelsesministeriet]. (n.d.). *Ny orlovsmode - øremærket orlov [New leave model – earmarked leave]*. Bm.dk. Retrieved May 29th 2022, from: <https://bm.dk/arbejdsmraader/aktuelle-fokusomraader/ny-orlovsmode-oeremaerket-orlov/>
- Eriksson, C., Larsson, M., & Tydén, T. (2012). Reflections on having children in the future-interviews with highly educated women and men without children. *Upsala Journal of Medical Sciences*, 117(3), 328–335. <https://doi.org/10.3109/03009734.2012.654862>

- Flick, U. (2007). Standards, Criteria, Checklists and Guidelines. In *Managing Quality in Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Galletta, A. (2013). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication*. New York University Press.
- Ganle, J. K., Apolot, R. R., Rugoho, T., & Sumankuuro, J. (2020). “They are my future”: childbearing desires and motivations among women with disabilities in Ghana - implications for reproductive healthcare. *Reproductive Health, 17(1)*, 151.
<https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-020-01000-y>
- Hardman, & Macchi, L. (2004). *Thinking: Psychological Perspectives on Reasoning, Judgment and Decision Making*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/047001332X>
- Hundeide, K. (2005). Socio-cultural Tracks of Development, Opportunity Situations and Access Skills. *Culture & Psychology, 11(2)*, 241–261.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X05052353>
- Hundeide, K. (2004). *Børns livsverden og sociokulturelle rammer [Children’s life worlds and sociocultural contexts]*. Akademisk Forlag.
- Jalovaara, M., Neyer, G., Andersson, G., Dahlberg, J., Dommermuth, L., Fallesen, P., & Lappegård, T. (2018). Education, Gender, and Cohort Fertility in the Nordic Countries. *European Journal of Population, 35(3)*, 563–586. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-018-9492-2>
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *Interview: det kvalitative forskningsinterview som håndværk [InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing]* (Nake, B., Trans.; 3rd ed.). Hans Reitzel. (Original work published 2014).
- Lampic, C., Svanberg, A. S., Karlström, P., & Tydén, T. (2006). Fertility awareness, intentions concerning childbearing, and attitudes towards parenthood among female

and male academics. *Human Reproduction (Oxford)*, 21(2), 558–564.

<https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dei367>

Langdrige, D. (2007). *Phenomenological psychology: theory, research, and method*.

Pearson Education.

Langdrige, D., Sheeran, P., & Connolly, K. (2005). Understanding the reasons for parenthood. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology*, 23(2), 121–133.

Madureira, A. (2018) Social Identities, Gender, and Self: Cultural Canalization in Imagery Societies, in Rosa, A., & Jaan Valsiner. (2018). *The Cambridge handbook of sociocultural psychology*. Cambridge University Press.

Miettinen, A., Rotkirch, A., Szalma, I., Donno, A., & Tanturri, M.-L. (2015). Increasing childlessness in Europe: time trends and country differences. *Families and Societies*, 33. Retrieved May 29th 2022, from: <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/WP33MiettinenEtAl2015.pdf>

Mortensen, L., Hegaard, H. K., Andersen, A. N., & Bentzen, J. G. (2012). Attitudes towards motherhood and fertility awareness among 20-40-year-old female healthcare professionals. *The European Journal of Contraception & Reproductive Health Care*, 17(6), 468–481. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13625187.2012.728015>

Parke, R. (2013). *Future families diverse forms, rich possibilities*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.

Petersen, K. B. (2019). Præventionsprincipper og provokeret abort [Contraceptive principles and provoked abortion]. In C. Graugaard, A. Giraldi, & B. Møhl (Eds.), *Sexologi [Sexology]* (pp. 613–640). Munksgaard.

Petersen, K., Sylvest, R., Nyboe Andersen, A., Pinborg, A., Westring Hvidman, H., & Schmidt, L. (2016). Attitudes towards family formation in cohabiting and single childless women in their mid- to late thirties. *Human Fertility*, 19(1), 48–55.

<https://doi.org/10.3109/14647273.2016.1156171>

- Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(1), 25–41.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>
- Rowland, D. (2007). Historical Trends in Childlessness. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(10), 1311–1337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303823>
- Russel, H. (2015, September 14). “There’s no stigma”: why so many Danish women are opting to become single mothers. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/sep/14/no-stigma-single-mothers-denmark-solomors>
- Smith, N. (2012). Kvinders økonomiske bidrag til velfærdsstaten [Women’s financial contribution to the welfare state]. In De Økonomiske Råd [The Economic Council]. *Jubilæumsskrift - De Økonomiske Råd: 1962-2012* [Anniversary writing – The Economic Council: 1962-2012]. De Økonomiske Råd; Albertslund.
- Sobotka, T. (2017) Childlessness in Europe: Reconstructing Long-Term Trends Among Women Born in 1900–1972. In: Kreyenfeld M., Konietzka D. (eds) *Childlessness in Europe: Contexts, Causes, and Consequences. Demographic Research Monographs (A series of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research)*. Springer, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-44667-7_2
- Statistics Denmark. [Danmarks Statistik]. (2015, November). *Hver ottende kvinde og hver femte mand er barnløs som 50-årig* [Every eighth woman and every fifth man is childless at 50 years of age]. Retrieved February 15, 2022, from
<https://www.dst.dk/da/presse/Pressemeddelelser/2015/2015-11-20-hver-ottende-kvinde-og-hver-femte-mand>

- Statistics Denmark. [Danmarks statistik]. (2020, December). *Mænd og familier 2020. [Men and families 2020]*. Retrieved February 22nd, 2022, from <https://www.dst.dk/Site/Dst/Udgivelser/GetPubFile.aspx?id=41883&sid=manfam2020>
- Statistics Netherlands (2005, May). *Childlessness and education level*. Statistics Netherlands. Retrieved February 22, 2022, from <https://www.cbs.nl/en-gb/news/2004/22/childlessness-and-education-level>
- Svanberg, A. S., Lampic, C., Karlström, P. O., & Tydén, T. (2006). Attitudes toward parenthood and awareness of fertility among postgraduate students in Sweden. *Gender Medicine*, 3(3), 187–195. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1550-8579\(06\)80207-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1550-8579(06)80207-x)
- Tanggaard, L. & Brinkmann, S. (2022) Kvalitet I kvalitative studier [Quality in qualitative studies]. In Brinkmann, & Tanggaard, L. (2022). *Kvalitative metoder: en grundbog (3. udgave.) [Qualitative methods: a handbook (3rd ed)]*. Hans Reitzel.
- Tydén, T., Svanberg, A. S., Karlström, P.-O., Lihoff, L., & Lampic, C. (2006). Female university students' attitudes to future motherhood and their understanding about fertility. *The European Journal of Contraception & Reproductive Health Care*, 11(3), 181–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13625180600557803>
- Volgsten, H., & Schmidt, L. (2021). Exploring Swedish single women's decision to choose motherhood through medically assisted reproduction – a qualitative study. *Human Fertility*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647273.2021.2017026>

Curriculum

- Andersson, G., Rønsen, M., Knudsen, L. B., Lappegård, T., Neyer, G., Skrede, K., Teschner, K., & Vikat, A. (2009). Cohort Fertility Patterns in the Nordic Countries. *Demographic Research*, 20, 313–352. <https://doi.org/10.4054/demres.2009.20.14>
- Bergqvist, C. et al. (1999). *Equal democracies?: gender and politics in the Nordic countries*. Scandinavian University Press.
- Boivin, J., Buntin, L., Kalebic, N., & Harrison, C. (2018). What makes people ready to conceive? Findings from the International Fertility Decision-Making Study. *Reproductive Biomedicine & Society Online*, 6, 90–101. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.rbms.2018.10.012>
- Brinkmann, S. (2015). Etik i en kvalitativ verden [Ethics in a qualitative world]. In S. Brinkmann & L. Tanggaard, (Red.), *Kvalitative Metoder: en grundbog [Qualitative methods: a handbook]*. Hans Reitzels Forlag [Reused]
- Eriksson, C., Larsson, M., & Tydén, T. (2012). Reflections on having children in the future- interviews with highly educated women and men without children. *Uppsala Journal of Medical Sciences*, 117(3), 328–335. <https://doi.org/10.3109/03009734.2012.654862>
- Flick, U. (2007). Standards, Criteria, Checklists and Guidelines. In *Managing Quality in Qualitative Research*. SAGE Publications, Ltd.
- Galletta, A. (2013). *Mastering the semi-structured interview and beyond: From research design to analysis and publication*. New York University Press.
- Ganle, J. K., Apolot, R. R., Rugoho, T., & Sumankuuro, J. (2020). “They are my future”: childbearing desires and motivations among women with disabilities in Ghana - implications for reproductive healthcare. *Reproductive Health*, 17(1), 151. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12978-020-01000-y>

- Hardman, & Macchi, L. (2004). *Thinking: Psychological Perspectives on Reasoning, Judgment and Decision Making*. John Wiley & Sons, Incorporated.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/047001332X>
- Hundeide, K. (2005). Socio-cultural Tracks of Development, Opportunity Situations and Access Skills. *Culture & Psychology, 11*(2), 241–261.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1354067X05052353>
- Hundeide, K. (2004). *Børns livsverden og sociokulturelle rammer [Children's life worlds and sociocultural contexts]*. Akademisk Forlag.
- Jalovaara, M., Neyer, G., Andersson, G., Dahlberg, J., Dommermuth, L., Fallesen, P., & Lappegård, T. (2018). Education, Gender, and Cohort Fertility in the Nordic Countries. *European Journal of Population, 35*(3), 563–586. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10680-018-9492-2>
- Kvale, S. & Brinkmann, S. (2015). *Interview: det kvalitative forskningsinterview som håndværk [InterViews: Learning the Craft of Qualitative Research Interviewing]* (Nake, B., Trans.; 3rd ed.). Hans Reitzel. (Original work published 2014). [Reused]
- Lampic, C., Svanberg, A. S., Karlström, P., & Tydén, T. (2006). Fertility awareness, intentions concerning childbearing, and attitudes towards parenthood among female and male academics. *Human Reproduction (Oxford), 21*(2), 558–564.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/humrep/dei367>
- Langdrige, D. (2007). *Phenomenological psychology: theory, research, and method*. Pearson Education. [Reused]
- Langdrige, D., Sheeran, P., & Connolly, K. (2005). Understanding the reasons for parenthood. *Journal of Reproductive and Infant Psychology, 23*(2), 121–133.

- Madureira, A. (2018) Social Identities, Gender, and Self: Cultural Canalization in Imagery Societies, in Rosa, A., & Jaan Valsiner. (2018). *The Cambridge handbook of sociocultural psychology*. Cambridge University Press.
- Miettinen, A., Rotkirch, A., Szalma, I., Donno, A., & Tanturri, M.-L. (2015). Increasing childlessness in Europe: time trends and country differences. *Families and Societies*, 33. Retrieved May 29th 2022, from: <http://www.familiesandsocieties.eu/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/WP33MiettinenEtAl2015.pdf>
- Mortensen, L., Hegaard, H. K., Andersen, A. N., & Bentzen, J. G. (2012). Attitudes towards motherhood and fertility awareness among 20-40-year-old female healthcare professionals. *The European Journal of Contraception & Reproductive Health Care*, 17(6), 468–481. <https://doi.org/10.3109/13625187.2012.728015>
- Parke, R. (2013). *Future families diverse forms, rich possibilities*. John Wiley & Sons Inc.
- Petersen, K. B. (2019). Præventionsprincipper og provokeret abort [Contraceptive principles and provoked abortion]. In C. Graugaard, A. Giraldi, & B. Møhl (Eds.), *Sexologi [Sexology]* (pp. 613–640). Munksgaard.
- Petersen, K., Sylvest, R., Nyboe Andersen, A., Pinborg, A., Westring Hvidman, H., & Schmidt, L. (2016). Attitudes towards family formation in cohabiting and single childless women in their mid- to late thirties. *Human Fertility*, 19(1), 48–55. <https://doi.org/10.3109/14647273.2016.1156171>
- Robinson, O. C. (2014). Sampling in Interview-Based Qualitative Research: A Theoretical and Practical Guide. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 11(1), 25–41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14780887.2013.801543>
- Rowland, D. (2007). Historical Trends in Childlessness. *Journal of Family Issues*, 28(10), 1311–1337. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303823>

- Russel, H. (2015, September 14). “*There’s no stigma*”: why so many Danish women are opting to become single mothers. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/sep/14/no-stigma-single-mothers-denmark-solomors>
- Smith, N. (2012). Kvinders økonomiske bidrag til velfærdsstaten [Women’s financial contribution to the welfare state]. In De Økonomiske Råd [The Economic Council]. *Jubilæumsskrift - De Økonomiske Råd: 1962-2012* [Anniversary writing – *The Economic Council: 1962-2012*]. De Økonomiske Råd; Albertslund.
- Sobotka, T. (2017) Childlessness in Europe: Reconstructing Long-Term Trends Among Women Born in 1900–1972. In: Kreyenfeld M., Konietzka D. (eds) *Childlessness in Europe: Contexts, Causes, and Consequences. Demographic Research Monographs (A series of the Max Planck Institute for Demographic Research)*. Springer, Cham.
https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-319-44667-7_2
- Svanberg, A. S., Lampic, C., Karlström, P. O., & Tydén, T. (2006). Attitudes toward parenthood and awareness of fertility among postgraduate students in Sweden. *Gender Medicine*, 3(3), 187–195. [https://doi.org/10.1016/s1550-8579\(06\)80207-x](https://doi.org/10.1016/s1550-8579(06)80207-x)
- Tanggaard, L. & Brinkmann, S. (2022) Kvalitet I kvalitative studier [Quality in qualitative studies]. In Brinkmann, & Tanggaard, L. (2022). *Kvalitative metoder: en grundbog* (3. udgave.) [Qualitative methods: a handbook (3rd ed)]. Hans Reitzel.
- Tydén, T., Svanberg, A. S., Karlström, P.-O., Lihoff, L., & Lampic, C. (2006). Female university students’ attitudes to future motherhood and their understanding about fertility. *The European Journal of Contraception & Reproductive Health Care*, 11(3), 181–189. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13625180600557803>

Volgsten, H., & Schmidt, L. (2021). Exploring Swedish single women's decision to choose motherhood through medically assisted reproduction – a qualitative study. *Human Fertility*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14647273.2021.2017026>