

Costs and benefits of parenthood in Sweden: Quantitative and qualitative evidence

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Abstract

The Swedish research project 'Family and working life in the 21st century' consists of a quantitative and qualitative part. The main goal is to broaden our understandings of young adults' attitudes and values regarding family formation as well as to study the relationship between attitudes and demographic behaviour. In this paper, we present findings on how young Swedes refer to costs and benefits of becoming a parent in panel surveys as well as in focus group interviews with informants who have not yet entered parenthood as well as first time parents. The quantitative data set consists of information from three questionnaire surveys for about 3500 respondents, aged 28-40 at the time of the third wave in 2009. Among the many attitudinal questions included in the survey questionnaires, one was intended to measure parenthood attitudes. Childless respondents were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 to 5, whether they expected less personal freedom, economic problems, less time for friends, a better partner relationship, and/or a more meaningful life, as a result of becoming a parent. In addition, those who had already become parents were asked how they perceived the effect of becoming a parent in these regards. When the focus group participants talked about parenthood, they recurrently referred to a range of tribulations. When the deferment of parenthood is justified, parenthood is pictured as restricting for personal development and experiences. However, when the desire to enter into parenthood is understood, parenthood is referred to as entailing personal development and progress. A common answer among both parents and non-parents is that a child legitimates a change of focus in life, from individual self-fulfilment to the child.

Extended abstract

Costs and benefits of parenthood

The cost of having a child is believed to have increased in the Western world in the 20th century. Concurrently with the increase in mass schooling, having a child turned into a monetary cost rather than an asset, and the child was increasingly valued emotionally rather than financially, as scholars such as John Caldwell and Viviana Zelizer have shown. The costs of parenthood, as they appear to be defined in the contemporary Western world, are categorized in an illuminating way by James Fawcett in an article published in 1988: increasing monetary expenses; loss of income; opportunity costs (career, leisure activities, free time); psychological costs (less time for oneself, decreasing flexibility and mobility, increasing worries and concerns); and physical costs (straining bodily aspects of childbearing, childbirth and breastfeeding, as well as of childrearing). Duane Alwin argued in 1996 that parents' childbearing preferences have changed over the course of the 20th century, away from praising obedience and good manners in the child, to encouraging independence, autonomy, and commitment to education (for future prospects). Alwin suggested that there is a relationship between decreasing fertility and changes in childrearing. The 'wrong' upbringing and/or 'lacking' capabilities to raise the child 'properly' are looked upon as personal deficiencies of the parent(s); the parents have failed to live up to their responsibility as good parents – they have not acknowledged or have failed to practice knowledge about how to act in accordance with what is best for the child. As a result, childless people may ask themselves whether they are ready and competent enough to have a child.

The image of parenthood as entailing new, heavy burdens and responsibilities may be daunting for some (or many), but most people, as it appears in the quantitative and qualitative parts of our project, look upon parenthood as an important, anticipated ingredient in life. Thus, when trying to gain wider insights into reproductive decision-making, it is important to consider the benefits of parenthood. The value of children has often been regarded in terms of monetary costs and benefits, but the cultural value of children (and parenthood), has how this may influence family formation, gender relations and fertility, has often been ignored. James Fawcett (1988) also enumerated a range of potential benefits of entering parenthood: Parenthood as a marker of adult status; parenthood as engendering social acceptance in that having children at some stage is the expected thing to do; the child reproduces the family and connects the generations; the child brings joy in life and new experiences to the parents; the child is a permanent person to love; and, finally, the accomplishments of the child may reflect positively on the parents. But what do we find in our contemporary study of Swedish young adults' notions of parenthood and the timing of parenthood?

Quantitative data

The quantitative data set consists of information from three questionnaire surveys for about 3500 respondents, aged 28-40 at the time of the third wave in 2009. Among the many attitudinal questions included in the survey questionnaires, one was intended to measure parenthood attitudes. Childless respondents were asked to indicate, on a scale from 1 to 5, whether they expected less personal freedom, economic problems, less time for friends, a better partner relationship, and/or a more meaningful life, as a result of becoming a parent. In addition, those who had already become parents were asked how they perceived the effect of becoming a parent in these regards.

The quantitative part of the proposed paper will present the response pattern regarding parenthood attitudes (positive and negative consequences of becoming a parent), contrasting expectations among those who are still childless with the reported experience of those who have become parents. We expect that the effects will be different, depending for example on the respondent's gender, earlier gender role attitudes or career expectations. The quantitative part of the paper will be largely descriptive and give the overall picture, and thus serve as a background for the qualitative analysis based on focus group interviews.

The focus group data

The choice of collecting focus group data was based on previous research promoting the focus group method for those interested in exploring the ways in which people reason around a given topic and how they agree with and oppose the accounts of other participants. The method turned out to be very fruitful in providing rich data on notions of parenthood and the timing of parenthood. The focus group interviews can be seen as having illuminated norms, ideals and opinions and the ways in which these are referred to by the informants. The data consists of nine focus group interviews conducted in different parts of Sweden in 2002 and 2003. A total of 35 individuals between 24 and 39 years of age participated in the focus groups, 12 men and 23 women. The number of participants in each group varied from two to seven, and the interviews lasted from 1.5 to 2 hours. Twelve of the participants in the data were first-time parents with a child between three weeks and twenty months old. Three individuals were expecting their first child at the time of the interview. The remaining twenty were not parents.

When the focus group participants talked about parenthood – how they imagine and imagined parenthood – they recurrently referred to a range of tribulations. The uncertainties and hardships parenthood is portrayed to entail were talked about as reasons for deferring the transition. The participants brought up straining aspects of parenthood similar to Fawcett's enumeration presented above, but the monetary costs of parenthood were not commonly brought up in the discussions. So what tribulations do the focus group participants refer to? Parenthood is talked about as a life involving lack of sleep, lack of energy, stress with regard to organizing the activities of everyday life and how to be a good parent, and less time for friends, one's partner and oneself. Parenthood connotes a lifestyle change with increasing responsibilities, which is regarded as a risk in this sort of reasoning. Nevertheless, the majority of focus group participants refer to parenthood as an anticipated transition to make.

However, the benefits of parenthood do not come across as something reflected over as much as the possible tribulations. After having pondered the question of why a child is desired, a variety of reasons were brought up. Having somebody to love and to get love from are briefly mentioned aspects, as are joy and happiness. A common answer among both parents and non-parents is that a child legitimates a change of focus in life, from individual self-fulfilment to the child. A child gives a parent someone else to think about and to care for. One way of picturing parenthood is that it releases a person from self-fulfilment, but another way is to define parenthood as a continuation of self-fulfilment. When the deferment of parenthood is justified, parenthood is pictured as restricting for personal development and experiences, but when the desire to enter into parenthood is understood, parenthood is referred to as entailing personal development and progress. Entering into parenthood means "going on with life" and "wanting to live a family life" that engenders additional experiences and social contacts. Parenthood is said to offer a new dimension; it provides a possibility to break the routine of the everyday life as a childless adult. One of the most emphasized reasons for entering parenthood, besides parenthood working as a sign of normalcy, is the picture of parenthood as an insurance against loneliness and dull life during older age. The common line or argumentation is that the child provides the parents with somebody "to live through" and company when the parents grow older. Another common answer to why parenthood is desired is that by having a child a person's genes are reproduced. Additional ways to express this is that a child is a creation of one's own flesh and blood, leaves something to the future, is a copy of oneself, and reproduces the family.

References

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