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Not Right Now

Men's Emotional Reflexivity and Future Engagement Regarding Children in Late
Modernity's Acceleration

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Abstract

In Sweden, just like in other European countries, fertility rates have declined, and an increasing number of men are childless at older ages. The increasing risk of childlessness has been argued to be due to the postponement of family formation because of the 'waiting game'. The purpose of this study is to explore how childless young heterosexual men reflect on having children in the future and how emotions influence their reflexivity about children in the future. The study is based on interviews with nine men, aged 24-31, five who are in relationships, and four who are single. The results indicate that most men desire children, but not right now, as they fear a loss of freedom to explore their current life. The men also display emotions of optimism that family life will come about at a later stage, making it possible for them to remain in their current exploration. The men's current trajectory of exploration could be conflicting with their naturalized plan of family life, but it is the optimism that makes the action make sense on both. As they shape their life in response to the emotions of fear and optimism, the men display emotional reflexivity. This desire to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration is connected to the promise of the social acceleration, that one can have increasing experiences and life projects within one life span. By adding the temporal perspective with emotional reflexivity and how this is connected to the promise of the social acceleration, this study furthers the understanding of the 'waiting game'.

Keywords: young men, childless, emotional reflexivity, late modernity, social acceleration, future coordination

Introduction

Becoming a parent is, for many, seen as a natural step into adulthood where starting a family creates new meanings of life (Fieldsend & Smith, 2022), which is often assumed to be achieved when intended (Shirani & Henwood, 2011). Most men desire to become a father and view parenthood as something fulfilling (Hammarberg et al., 2017). During the last decades, there has been a tendency towards postponement of family formation, leading to a decline in fertility rates in European countries (Billari et al., 2006) and other non-European countries e.g. Canada (Ravanera & Beaujot, 2014). Ravanera and Beaujot (2014) argue that the sequence of events, where becoming a father is third after finding a satisfying job and a long-term union, can lead to childlessness among men, due to what they term the ‘waiting game’. The ‘waiting game’ is in this thesis understood as withholding family formation to a later stage where it is more favorable. Not achieving parenthood at the intended time has been found to be emotionally difficult for men (Hanna & Gough, 2016), while involuntary childlessness among men can cause feelings of loss without closure (Fieldsend & Smith, 2022) and impact their social networks later in life (Hadley, 2021). The increasing childlessness at older ages can also be seen in Sweden where an increasing number of men and women are childless by the age of 30, and a notably higher proportion of men are childless compared to women (Statistics Sweden, 2020). The decline in first births in Sweden has been argued to be due to perceived uncertainties about global issues (Ohlsson-Wijk & Andersson, 2022). While others have argued that the postponement is due to the things youth feel they need to do before family formation (Bodin et al., 2021). Explanations that have been highlighted in the public debate (Österström, 2021; Larsson, 2023).

Despite the aforementioned findings, it has continued to be noted that there is a paucity of research on not being a father (Hadley, 2020; Throsby & Gill, 2004). Some research has explored men’s ideas about becoming a father, which often is in line with the arguments from Ravanera and Beaujot (2014). It has been found to be a certain order for fatherhood (Hviid Malling et al., 2022; Jensen, 2016), and that some men could have year-long negotiations about having children to resist their partners' desire (Jensen, 2016). The chronological order is argued by Hviid Malling et al. (2022) to be connected to Giddens (1991) reflexivity and identity creation in late modernity. Hviid Malling et al. (2022) found that some men postponed parenthood due to the feeling of having endless options in life to choose from. This could also lead to frustration among the men as they felt societal pressure to explore them all. This topic could be approached from the perspective of late modernity

theorists such as Giddens (1991), as Hviid Malling et al. (2022) argue. However, as there is an inherent temporality to the ‘waiting game’, Hartmut Rosa’s theory of social acceleration is more suited as it, in contrast with other late modernity theorists, offers this temporal approach. The inherent temporality also raises the question of how the men engage with their future, understood as that the future is made and measured within different logics which is entrenched in social practices (Mandich, 2020).

In late modernity, reflexivity and emotions are central as we construct and manage identities and emotions in the ever-changing society around us. Reflexivity and emotions are connected as emotions aid the process of reflexivity and that we are more reflexive about the emotions themselves, both on an individual and a societal level (Patulny & Olsson, 2019). The centrality of emotions leads to emotional reflexivity (Holmes, 2010). In emotional reflexivity, actors alter their life in response to their emotions. But they also interpret their own emotions and the feelings of others about one’s circumstances (Holmes, 2015b). As men who currently are childless reflect upon having children in the future, it will elicit emotions in them. The ‘waiting game’ is argued to lead to childlessness that is not by choice (Ravanera & Beaujot, 2014). By adding an emotional perspective where emotions and rationality are seen as a continuum (Barbalet, 1998), it is possible to explore how emotions guide choices within the ‘waiting game’. Exploring men’s emotional reflexivity will thus further the understanding of how they shape their lives in response to these emotions about having children and how they talk about these emotions with others and by extension the ‘waiting game’.

The purpose of this thesis is to explore how childless young heterosexual men (aged 24 to 31) reflect on having children in the future and how emotions influence their reflexivity about when it is appropriate to have children. It seeks to answer the following research questions:

RQ1: How does late modernity’s social acceleration influence men’s reflections about having children?

RQ2: How are emotions influencing men’s reflexivity about children in the future and the way they engage with the future?

RQ3: How do men talk about their emotions about becoming a father in the future with partners and potential partners?

This topic could be approached from different theoretical standpoints, e.g. a gender approach. However, exploring for example how masculinity influences how men talk about children is beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, this thesis departs from the

theoretical approach of social acceleration and how emotions guide the reflexive process when men reflect upon children in their future and engage with their future.

In the following sections, the previous research on men and their ideas about children; temporality, men, and fatherhood; and men's emotional reflexivity will be outlined. After which the theoretical framework of the thesis will be outlined followed by the methodology. This is followed by an analysis of the results and a concluding discussion.

Previous research

There is a lack of research on not being a father and has yet to be explored from the perspective of sociology of emotions and temporality, in connection with the social acceleration. In the following section, the previous research on men and their ideas about children; temporality in connection to fatherhood; and masculine emotional reflexivity is outlined. By exploring how men's emotional reflexivity and engagement with the future relate to the promise of social acceleration, that one can have increasing experiences and life projects, this thesis will add theoretical and empirical understanding of the 'waiting game'.

Men and ideas about children

Although it has been noted that there is a lack of research on not being a father (Hadley, 2020; Throsby & Gill, 2004) some research has lately been dedicated to the topic of not being a father and the desire and intention to have children. It has been explored how involuntary childlessness affects men emotionally (e.g. Fieldsend & Smith, 2022; Hadley, 2021; Hanna & Gough, 2016, 2021) and the desire to have children among involuntary childless men (Hadley & Hanley, 2011). Other research has focused on men's ideas about having children in the future (Jensen, 2016), the intention to have children in the future for young men (Hviid Malling, et al., 2022), and the want and reasons among men who were planning to have children with their partner (Bartholomaeus & Riggs, 2020).

Jensen (2016) interviewed men who were childless at the time to explore their ideas about having children. The main motives found for having children were a continuation of genes, one's flesh and blood, strengthening conjugal bonds, joy in life due to children, less loneliness later in life, and the change of focus in life that children would bring. The norm of having children was affirmed by the men and they felt a degree of social influence to have children. Some regretted their childlessness while others did not experience a great hurry to have children. For men in lasting unions, a higher degree of social pressure was experienced. Observing peers becoming fathers could influence the men so that the fear of becoming a

father was reduced, but it could also increase hesitation as peers became locked into the home. Furthermore, the men highlighted the relationship and the timing of having children. What is argued is that by delaying fatherhood, the men try to keep control over their life through temporal negotiations, that there is a chronological order to life where children have a certain place and a risk of falling behind if one fails to fulfill it. The negotiations that the men could have with their partner regarding having children could sometimes be year-long. This desire to have children for various reasons, yet being the driving force in the postponement of children, shows that ambivalence flourishes (Jensen, 2016). Lastly, Jensen (2016) argues that among the men who hesitate to take the step and become fathers, there is an increased risk of remaining childless. At the same time, although children are seen as something fulfilling for the men, this may also change when more men are childless in the future.

This chronological order is also found in a qualitative study of Danish and Swedish men, where doing things in the right order was important for the men (Hviid Malling, et al., 2022). This right order included completing education, a stable partnership, employment, a good financial situation, and housing, all of which should be completed before having children. Furthermore, the imagined perfect time to have children was influenced by when friends wanted children and at what time their parents had their first child. It is also noted that many of the men associated having children with loss of freedom, e.g. that the ability to travel the world and do what they wanted would vanish. These aspects of the chronological order and finding one's path and identity before having children are connected to reflexivity in late modernity. It was expressed in the way that the men had endless choices in life and experienced societal pressure to explore them all (Hviid Malling, et al., 2022). Hviid Malling et al. (2022) also distinguish between feeling mature enough to have children and feeling ready, showing that most of the men felt mature enough but not necessarily ready.

Ravanera and Beaujot (2014) studied the increasing childlessness among men in Canada and argue that this increase could be a result of the 'waiting game'. They argue that as men go through the course of their work and family life, they are confronted with economic constraints and diminishing opportunities, which results in a postponement of family formation and eventual childlessness. This forms the basis of the 'waiting game', e.g. getting a satisfying job and waiting until the couple feels ready (Ravanera & Beaujot, 2014). As many young people see children as part of their life goal but are hindered to achieve this due to difficulties and delays in achieving desired economic stability, they become childless not by choice but because of the 'waiting game'.

Not being a father continues to be under-researched, especially how men think about having children in their everyday life and the emotions connected to their imagined future as potential fathers. The previous research has provided insights into how men are affected by influences from others around them and the notion of the chronological order as well as that the ‘waiting game’ can lead to childlessness (Hviid Malling, et al., 2022; Jensen, 2016; Ravanera & Beaujot, 2014). However, there is still much to know regarding what the driving forces are of the ‘waiting game’ besides economic constraints and diminishing opportunities. The emotions tied to the chronological order and the waiting game also need to be explored further and how this relates to how men engage with their futures concerning children and family formation, which this thesis seeks to address.

Temporality, men, and fatherhood

Shirani and Henwood (2011) have explored temporality and men’s trajectories of the life course when faced with disruptive moments. The disruptions took the form of delayed conception, unexpected pregnancies, separation, or becoming a stepfather. They found that most of the men either felt that they were propelled into later stages of the life course or retreated to previous stages. In the case of delayed conception, the men often did not perceive a time limit on their fertility but rather that of the partner and tried to instill hope in the partner that they would eventually become pregnant. This included how they soon could try again and adopt a short-term, or day-to-day, relation to time. Some of the men were also concerned about their age when they would eventually become fathers with the risk of feeling too old. The unexpected pregnancies propelled the men to a later life course stage, disrupting the imagined futures that they had envisioned. Fear of being excluded from social activities was noted by young men leading to concerns about being isolated due to the propulsion. For those in their thirties, the unexpected pregnancies were more easily reconciled with their life plans while the older men felt they returned to previous life stages that they felt already had passed. In separations, the men felt a regress to previous life stages while being a stepfather propelled them into the future of the life plan. All situations meant a temporal disruption either by propelling to the future, regressing to previous stages, or leading to a pause. Long-term planning was often hard and rather the men adopted a day-to-day approach, in contrast to men who followed the planned life course trajectories. The men therefore often felt out of sync with their peers. Shirani and Henwood (2011) note that the participants perceived a linear trajectory of temporality.

Other research has focused on how the role of caregiving fathers has developed over time, adding a temporal dimension to understanding caregiving fathers (Hodkinson & Brooks, 2023). What they found and highlighted are what is called caregiving crossroads which are points where arrangements, roles, and identities are revisited or disrupted. This previous research has focused on men and fatherhood at disruptive moments. However, actors engage with futures in their everyday lives. Exploring how men engage with their futures as potential fathers in their everyday lives is something that needs to be explored.

Men's emotional reflexivity

Emotional reflexivity in close and intimate relationships has been applied to research on women in non-normative relations and their future building (Holmes et al., 2021), on gender in distance relationships (Holmes, 2015a, 2019), and on contemporary friendships and the etiquette among friends on social media (Holmes, 2011). Noting that masculine emotionality remains under-researched, Holmes (2015a) has explored heteromasculine emotional reflexivity in intimate relationships where the partners are not living in the same city. The study is based on 10 men who were interviewed jointly with their partner and explores if their distance relationship forces the men to similar kinds of emotional reflexivity. What is found is that the interviewed men indeed can exercise emotional reflexivity concerning their partner and show caring emotions. Emotional reflexivity is employed by both men and women in different interactions to figure out how to act and these reflections and actions are partly based on a perception of how they and others feel in different contexts of interaction. This emotional reflexivity is also influenced by gendered social relations in the way that it provides possibilities and constraints due to the gendered structures. In these interactions, men are not always unsuccessful in their emotionality but rather the emotional reflexivity is shown in different ways and with varying degrees of success. Even if some men seem to show more hegemonic masculinity, they can also be seen to prefer “more tactile forms of emotionality” (Holmes, 2015a, p. 188), and that the men do learn to be more expressive in their emotionality. Holmes, et al. (2021, p. 2) argue that “future building is pursued through emotional reflexivity”. However, as Holmes (2015a) also notes, men's emotionality remains under-researched. It is therefore important to further understand how men are emotionally reflexive when engaging with their futures regarding children and family formation.

Theoretical framework

To analyze how men reflect on having children in the future and how emotions influence their reflexivity about children in late modernity, this thesis will rely on the theories of social acceleration, emotional reflexivity, modes of engagement with the future, and coordinating futures. How they are combined to form the theoretical framework for this thesis is outlined below.

Social acceleration

Late modernity is characterized by reflexivity, individualism, and detraditionalization. Giddens (1991) argues that modernity is a detraditionalized society and that we rely on different sources of knowledge and expertise that must be navigated. This is an important part of Giddens' disembedding mechanisms. In late modernity, we are required to be more reflexive about who we are and to form our own identities. This in turn leads to greater individualization. The reflexivity takes place in a context where many different options are open to us and as traditions lose their value, thus more emphasis is put on lifestyles (Giddens, 1991). Beck (1992) also notes that modernity has led to individualization as the product of reflexivity, a process that has detraditionalized society. Bauman (2000) argues similarly, that in late modernity, identity is something that no longer is given but transformed into a task and by that is individualized. In the consumer culture, which characterizes late modernity, a happy life is a life where something always happens and is supposed to be a life free of boredom (Bauman, 2005). Rosa (2010; 2013) agrees with many of these characteristics of late modernity. Although, he argues that it is the social acceleration that is necessary for, and the consequence of, late modernity. In the acceleration, there is a cultural motor that promises us more options and the possibility to live a fulfilled life which is perceived as a solution to the finiteness of life.

The promise of a fulfilled life, i.e. the cultural motor, and the acceleration of social change and pace of life are central for this thesis. The acceleration is driven by technological acceleration, the acceleration of social change, and the acceleration of the pace of life (Rosa, 2010). It is the latter two that are relevant for this thesis. In the acceleration of social change, things like family-cycles and work have begun to speed up (Rosa, 2010). In previous times, these two aspects were more inter-generational while they now are intra-generational. This means that the family-cycle lasts less than a lifespan, indicated by the increasing divorces and remarriage, and that we change occupations many times in the lifespan. In the acceleration of the pace of life, individuals feel that they need to do more

things in less time. This leads to them feeling under time pressure, hurried and that time is scarce.

The three driving factors of the acceleration have become a feedback system that drives itself, what Rosa (2010) calls the acceleration cycle. But it is also driven by a social motor of competition and a cultural motor (Rosa, 2010). In the cultural motor, there is a promise that the acceleration will allow one to live a faster life and by that one will also be able to have more experiences and complete many life projects within one life span (Rosa, 2013). This promise of being able to have more experiences and complete many life projects in a life span is central to this thesis. Rosa (2010) argues that it has become a cultural motor because, in Western modernity, a good life is a fulfilled life where we have experienced as much as possible before we die. Rosa (2010, p. 30) writes “[t]o taste life in all its heights and depths and in its full complexity becomes a central aspiration of modern man” (emphasis in original). To be able to do so, we must be open and flexible to the things that life has to offer, or we risk falling behind (Rosa, 2014). However, there are always more options to experience than is possible, and therefore what is offered always outgrows what is possible to realize in a lifetime (Rosa, 2013).

Emotional reflexivity

As noted, in late modernity, western societies have become more individualized and reflexive, a process that lately is largely influenced by emotions (Patulny & Olsson, 2019). Emotions aid the reflexive process, but people are also more reflexive about their emotions. Holmes (2010) argues that emotions are central to the reflexive process. She further argues that when we rely less on traditions and routine actions, we must rely more on feelings to guide the reflexive process, e.g. who to trust has knowledge about things. Thus, we rely on emotional reflexivity. Emotional reflexivity is not to be equated with emotional work. Emotional work refers to “the act of trying to change in degree or quality an emotion or feeling” (Hochschild, 1979, p. 561), relating to the feeling rules of a situation. The feeling rules may differ between groups, they are often latent, and they can to various degrees be broken or challenged (Hochschild, 1979). However, there are still feeling rules to be analyzed and emotional work done by actors, consciously or unconsciously. Emotional reflexivity differs from emotional work in that actors consider emotions when shaping their lives, and the interpretation of one’s and others’ emotions. When actors rely less on norms and traditions, emotional reflexivity offers guidance (Holmes, 2010).

Holmes (2015b, p. 61) defines emotional reflexivity as “the practices of altering one’s life as a response to feelings, and to interpretations of one’s own and others’ feelings about one’s circumstances”, which this thesis follows. Emotional reflexivity is thus twofold. Firstly, it is that we alter our life in response to emotions. For this thesis, however, it will be defined not as altering one’s life but rather as shaping one’s life in response to emotions. As will be shown, in response to emotions the men either alter their lives or preserve their current life. Therefore, shaping one’s life is a more appropriate concept in this case. Secondly, it refers to the interpretations of the emotions that we have as well as the emotions of others. These other people can be real people that are close to us or a generalized other (Holmes, 2010). Burkitt (2012) develops on this aspect further and argues that these others, with whom we are emotionally engaged, populate our inner dialogue. This inner dialogue mediates between structure and agency and arises in the individual domain. What is central for Burkitt (2012) is the imagination of the actor which helps to shape our own form of agency. According to him, we see ourselves through the imagined emotional and value responses of others, real or generalized others. These imagined emotional responses and value judgments are based on our previous social experiences, influencing our interpretations of social situations and the others around us with whom we are emotionally engaged (Burkitt, 2012).

This thesis will utilize both these aspects of emotional reflexivity. The first part is suitable as the men who participate in this study will have various emotions about having children in the future. These emotions are both felt in the present but there are also prospective emotions that they imagine will come if they were to become fathers at different stages in their lives. For example, becoming a father today could mean fear of losing current freedoms and by that, there are prospective emotions of sadness if a shift between youth and adulthood would come too soon. In this, the men shape their life in response to these emotions as to when having children would be suitable in their lives. The second part is fruitful for exploring how these emotions relate to how the men talk about their emotions with partners and potential partners. The people with whom they are emotionally engaged populate the men’s inner dialogue and they imagine how they will respond to their emotions about children. This inner dialogue and the imagined emotional response and value judgments of these others regulate if and how these men talk about their feelings about children with their partners and potential partners.

Engaging with the future and coordinating anticipation

In the social acceleration, we are required to be open and flexible, and making plans is threatening as it would make actors fall out of the race (Rosa, 2014; 2010), indicating that we engage with the future in the regime of exploration, which is at the core of contemporary society (Mandich, 2020). In the regime of exploration, “we discover the future while we experience the social world” (Mandich, 2020, p. 696). Here, Mandich argues that reflexive projectivity is implied and the future is non-linear, it has many different possibilities. The engagement with the future in the regime of exploration is what this thesis mostly relies upon. Not only in the sense that the respondents may in their accounts describe how they engage with the future through exploration. But also, that they may desire to continue to engage with the future within this regime. Rosa (2013) further argues that in the social acceleration one can rely less on past experiences and what we have learned to form our expectations of the future, due to the contraction of the present. The relation to the future is at the same time central to the promise of the acceleration. Because of the increasing options in the acceleration, it is increasingly difficult to make long-term life plans and reliable outlooks on the future (Rosa, 2013). Therefore, it is important to be able to analyze and understand how the men engage with their future when reflecting upon having children, to which Mandich (2020) offers a suitable framework. She argues that we engage with the future in everyday life through different modes. Engaging with the future means that the future is not just something actors look at or oriented themselves towards, but it is entrenched in social practices and the future is made and measured within different logics (Mandich, 2020). Besides the regime of exploration, the modes of engagement with the future happen in the regime of familiarity, regime of justification, and regime of the plan.

In the regime of familiarity, Mandich (2020) draws upon Bourdieu’s notion of practical anticipation and argues that the future is lived and experienced without knowing it. The regime of familiarity can in many ways stand in contrast to the contraction of the present as it relies on the future and the past as lived in the present, i.e. it relies on experiences and expectations. However, as the central aspiration of modern man is to explore life to its fullest (Rosa, 2010) this may in turn be what is familiar. In the regime of justification, the future is engaged with when it must be described to a third party and must be valid to this third party (Mandich, 2020). In this thesis, the third party is considered me as a researcher, and the partners and potential partners. Therefore, the men may engage with the future in the regime of justification when they justify towards third parties when it is a good time to start family formation. Lastly, actors can engage with the future through the regime of the plan (Mandich,

2020). The plan is engaged with through a means-to-and-end form of agency. Mandich (2020) argues that the centrality of a plan when engaging with the future has been questioned, partly due to uncertainties of contemporary society. Rosa (2010) argues similarly that, due to the social acceleration, it is threatening to develop a life-plan as this could lead to one falling behind in all the options that the acceleration promises.

Although the modes of future engagement from Mandich (2020) are a suitable framework for analyzing the men's engagement with their future, it lacks how actors coordinate anticipation of different futures. This coordination is important to understand due to the contraction of the present and the increasing difficulty to make life plans in the acceleration (Rosa, 2013), for which Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) offer a suitable framework. They argue that actors continuously coordinate their orientation toward the future in their everyday lives. These future coordinations can detach from each other or interlace in various ways. The coordination is argued to be done through protention, actors' trajectories, and temporal orientations, e.g. naturalized plans (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). It is the latter two that are relevant for this study. Trajectories are in this thesis understood as projects "which proceed in ways that are more or less culturally predictable" by the actors (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013, p. 909). In these projects, individuals' active intentions, with their meaningful goals and ends, are central. The projects may vary for every individual, but they are not entirely disconnected from larger cultural frameworks (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). Such projects can be that certain aspects are to be fulfilled before having children, and as it is tied to larger cultural frameworks, these projects may relate to the promise of the acceleration, e.g. exploring aspects of self-fulfillment. Thus, these projects are active intentions with a goal and end that will eventually lead to family formation. Although they are connected to larger cultural frameworks, trajectories feel more intentional than plans which is a temporal orientation that feels natural to the actors (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). Plans are in the thesis understood as a naturalized temporal orientation that feels automatic to actors and they just need to take the steps on an assumed path (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). The naturalized plan can be that family life will come about as long as the men keep taking the steps on the assumed path. Tavory and Eliasoph (2013) argue that actors can be on different, perhaps even contesting, trajectories and naturalized plans at the same time as long as the actions make sense on both of them. In this way, the actors can coordinate different futures in their everyday lives.

As the men reflect on children in the future and when it may be suitable to have children, they engage with the future in different regimes. This engagement may happen in

different regimes at the same time, but they may also interplay with each other. When engaging with the future, emotional responses will arise to which they shape their life, influencing their engagement with the future, e.g. they may fear losing engagement with the future in the regime of exploration due to having children. However, they may also be optimistic that the envisioned future family life will eventually come about. As they reflect on when to have children, they also coordinate their future on different trajectories and naturalized plans. In this interplay between different regimes of engaging with the future and the coordination of futures, emotional reflexivity then becomes a central part. Therefore, they offer suitable complements to each other when exploring how men reflect upon having children.

Methodology

As the purpose of this thesis is to gain an understanding of the respondent's reflections about having children in the future and how they talk about this with people around them, semi-structured interviews were deemed the most suitable method (Marshall et al., 2022). Interviews are also a suitable method for revealing emotional reflexivity (Holmes, 2015b). Nine interviews were conducted, ranging from 40 minutes to 1,5 hours. Five of the interviews were conducted face-to-face and four of the interviews were done via Zoom. All interviews were recorded and stored securely on the university's cloud service. Finding respondents that were willing to participate was not always easy and more than these nine were initially approached. Most of the men were sure that they desired children in the future, and this could be reflected in that they chose to participate in the study. As the interviews were semi-structured, an interview guide was used with open-ended questions, see Appendix 1. The questions were not asked in a specific order and follow-up questions were asked, taking a more 'traveling' approach to the interviews (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018).

The sampling was a purposive snowball sampling where inclusion criteria were that the men need to either desire children or were thinking about it, those who desire to live a childfree life were excluded. An age span of 25-40 was originally set as a sampling criterion although the included respondents are aged between 24 (turning 25) and 31. Five of the men are in relationships and four are single. For a table of the participants, see Appendix 3. The respondents were recruited through personal contacts who were asked if they had friends who would be willing to participate in the study and respondents were then contacted and provided with initial information about the research project. Those who were interested in participating were given a more extensive information sheet about the participation and the rights of the

respondent after which informed consent of participation was given. There are some limitations due to this sample. Firstly, the sample size makes it hard to draw any general conclusions. Secondly, the sample is rather homogenous. Most men had some form of post-secondary education, e.g. university courses, university degrees, or higher vocational education. Furthermore, although the men had grown up in various places in Sweden, all but one now lived in the Gothenburg area, while the last one had lived in larger cities but now moved to a smaller city. This could influence the results and if interviews were to be conducted with blue-collar workers in smaller cities the results could be different. Thirdly, there could be a risk that the men who chose to participate were already quite set in their ideas about having children. The fact that more men than those who eventually participated were contacted could indicate this. That if one chose to participate, it may mean that one has already thought about the topic and is quite comfortable speaking about it. However, at least one indicated that he had not thought about the topic to a great extent. Yet, if interviews were to be conducted with more people who had not thought about children, other results may be evident.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed¹. When interviews are transcribed, they are decontextualized and the transcript is interpretive of the conversation (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2018). The interviews were transcribed word by word, however, as it is still decontextualized others may still make different interpretations of the material. The analysis was conducted in what Brinkmann and Kvale (2018) call theoretical reading with inspiration from narrative analysis. In theoretical reading, the interviews are read many times, and specific parts of interest are returned to and reflected on theoretically (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2018). This allowed for the analysis to be conducted in an abductive manner where the empirical material and theory are allowed to interplay with each other. As the interviews were read many times, the theoretical framework allowed for an understanding of the data but as it was reread, the data allowed for further development of the theoretical reading. In this theoretical reading, there was a focus on the narrative of the interviews. Kleres (2011) argues that narrative analysis is suitable for researching emotions as emotions are part of the narrative. When researching emotions, it can be done in a verbal manner and a non-verbal manner (Bloch, 1996). In the theoretical reading, focus was put on the narrative of how the respondents described their current reflections about having children in the future. For example, defining fear as the possibility of an undesirable outcome (Barbalet, 1998), a

¹ The interviews were conducted and transcribed in Swedish. All interview quotes are my translations.

narrative that describes possible undesirable outcomes can then be a fear narrative indicating this emotion. Similarly, if a narrative “implies a forecast of success because goal attainment is considered probable” (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010, p. 261) it can indicate emotions of optimism. But focus was also put on the verbalized emotions, e.g. that fear was explicitly stated, but also feelings of prospective sadness and regret.

There can be a challenge to know the emotions of the respondents as emotions are not always explicitly stated and other emotions may be hidden in the data besides emotional words used (Wettergren, 2015). In the analytical process of emotions, the emotions of the researcher should not be overlooked as they can hint towards other emotions in the data. As a 30+ male who has personally reflected about children in the future, my reflections of course influence my understanding of the data. However, it also makes me well suited to conduct this research as I have a shared understanding with the respondents. Furthermore, being transparent about the fact that I have reflected on my ideas about children in the future allowed me to build rapport with the respondents which could make them more comfortable with sharing emotions.

Ethical considerations

All participants were given written information before participating in the study. This included information about how the data would be handled, that the participation was voluntary and that all names would be pseudonymized. See Appendix 2 for the information provided. After being given the information, the participants signed the document and confirmed that they would like to participate. The participants also approved for the interviews to be recorded for later transcription. The interviews were stored on the university cloud and a password-protected computer was used when working with the data. The real name of participants was not included in the audio files and transcription and a key for the pseudonyms was stored offline. The recorded interviews were uploaded to Word and transcribed using the university cloud. Both recordings and transcriptions were deleted after the completion of the thesis.

Results and analysis

In the following section, the main themes of the results are outlined. The results will add to the understanding of the ‘waiting game’ by showing how these men engage with the future in different modes and the emotions that are tied to it. Most of the men desire to continue to engage with the future within the regime of exploration which is much in line with the

promise of acceleration. They shape their life in response to the emotions of moving away from it. This will add to the understanding of the 'waiting game'.

Not right now: the fear of losing the freedom to explore

The most common theme the men talked about was that they did not want to have children right now, although most of them desired children or leaned towards having them later. The reason for not wanting children right now was mostly that it would lead to a loss of freedom and the possibility to explore their current lives. Sebastian differed from the rest, as he at the time of the interview felt that he probably does not want biological children but can see himself maybe adopting or having foster children, but not right now. Magnus stood out as he is, in his own words, 110% ready to have children and start a family. The reasons why the men wanted to wait could vary, but mostly it related to parts of their self-fulfillment and their exploration of this. It included finishing studies; exploring career options; cities they wanted to live in; have a more stable financial situation. Overall, there was a fear among the men that having children would entail a loss of freedom, that the shift from a youthful life to an adult life would come too early, and that having children would mean missing out on possibilities. In general, the men engaged with the future in the regime of exploration, which they desired to continue to do, as they wanted to experience the social world and by that discover the future.

The fears and worries that having a child would mean a loss of freedom were true for men both single and in relationships. This freedom is often tied to ideas about self-fulfillment. Fredrik, displayed a prospective emotion of regret when thinking about children. He thought that some people may regret children but not say it. Because of this potential regret, he is a little unsure about having children and sacrificing what he currently enjoys. When asked to expand upon this and what he thinks about it he said

I can feel a little like this sometimes that fuck do I really want to sacrifice that [...] life that I enjoy with and that freedom that I have and such [...] for something that I'm maybe not completely 100 about will be better.

Right now, he also wants him and his partner to enjoy the lifestyle called DINK (Double Income No Kids) and would like to do this for two to three years. This includes saving money, traveling, and the freedom to go to restaurants in the middle of the week. Having this freedom and currently engaging in the exploration of what this lifestyle offers is part of his self-fulfillment and there is a fear of losing this freedom if he has a child. He said

somehow I think I land in little egocentric thoughts, that I put myself a little too much in the center also, that it is my self-fulfillment [...] somewhere that I want to continue with maybe and am

afraid that this self-fulfillment then will, and it will, that I do also know of course that it will be put aside.

Although he imagines that he wants to do this for two to three years and then he may feel that he has done all this. Fredrik is also reflexive about that after these years, he may still feel that he is not done and want to continue that lifestyle. Fredrik thus wants to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration to achieve his self-fulfillment. It also shows the promise of the acceleration, that it will be possible to have as many experiences as possible and complete many life projects in one life span. However, there will always be more options available than what is possible to realize (Rosa, 2010), and as Fredrik notes, he may not feel that he is done after two or three years of this lifestyle. He also displays emotional reflexivity as he shapes his life in response to emotions of fear as the sacrifice of freedom would be an undesirable outcome and prospective regret, leading to the preservation of his current lifestyle.

Like Fredrik, Niklas also wants to explore aspects of his self-fulfillment before having children. However, a difference is that Niklas is sure that he wants to have children later as this is also part of his self-fulfillment. In the interview, he reflects on the relationship between these self-fulfillments and how it can be stressful to strive for both. Because children have always been seen as something given in his life, he can sometimes feel that it is hard to be able to do everything that he wants to do for it to feel like the right time to have children. Currently, he is exploring the other parts of his self-fulfillment. He said

there are of course other big parts in one's self, in my self-fulfillment also that you somewhere wants, you want to be able to do. [...] Now you create the preconditions for that part of your fulfillment that has to do with one as an individual and yeah but that you yourself want to establish and be able to achieve with your life

Niklas also believes that as he explores this, the other important aspects will follow. For example, as he explores where he wants to live and start a career, finding the right partner in this city will follow. Later in the interview, he also reflects on how this exploration will make it possible for him to feel ready for children. Through the exploration, he will find a place where he feels happy and can stay for a while. It is evident here that Niklas wants to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration right now and it will eventually lead to a place where he can feel that some parts of this self-fulfillment are achieved and there, he will be ready to begin to form the family life. The promise of the acceleration is evident here as Niklas has many life projects and experiences that he will be able to achieve through exploration. But as there will always be more options available than what is possible to realize (Rosa, 2010) there is also a risk that the exploration will never bring Niklas to the point where

he feels ready. Niklas displays emotional reflexivity as he shapes his life in response to emotions of fear of losing the freedom to explore leading to a preservation of his current lifestyle.

Just like the others, Daniel did not want children right now and the main reason was that he would feel trapped and sometimes bored. However, he also felt that he absolutely wants children in the future and that he does look forward to this. The reason why Daniel does not want children right now is mostly related to his career, where to live, and the ability to go on spontaneous trips. It would feel like a loss of freedom to have children right now, something that he continuously came back to during the interview. When speaking about how it would be if he were to have children now and how he would be in that role, he said

just that it becomes such a clear line and then like OK. But now there are parts of my life that I must leave behind me. And that feels like, considering where I am in life now. Again with like [...] career and not really know where I want to be now. [...] then it more feels that it is not an optimal time. To have children, now.

He returns to this clear line later in the interview where he states that if he and his partner were to have children now, the shift between youth and adulthood would come earlier than he wishes. That this clear line would come too early worries him slightly and it would be a sorrow for him, as opportunities for exploring career and where to live would disappear. What is evident in the account of Daniel, is that he desires children in the future and imagines how having children would feel. However, he also has emotions of imagined loss of freedom and feeling trapped, but there is also a prospective sadness of opportunities lost.

The reason why Gustav wants to wait is slightly different, as it mostly relates to his career and creating financial stability. However, as he wants to explore his current career paths and can do this now that he is single and childless, he still engages in the regime of exploration. Having financial stability meant giving his possible future children the best conditions and he wanted to give to his children what his parents had given him. Putting in the work now to achieve this financial stability and develop his career to a place where he wants it to be is also, according to Gustav, because of how expensive it will be to have children. Because of this, financial stability plays into his feeling of being ready to have children. When asked if he felt ready, he said

to be ready for it right now like. Emotionally for it. I would say. But ready like financially, which also affects emotions. I don't feel ready. Yeah, I feel after all like. As a father, I want to like, [...] that the child should have the best conditions and I think that the best conditions are that. Partly that you have, firstly a job [...] that you enjoy, you earn good. You have stability, you know what

is expected of you. But yeah [...] you have a safe spot on the job because if you have that then it becomes a, like, much safer environment at home.

He continued to talk about having a plan for where one should live, perhaps even buying a house before so that you are ready when a child would come. Later, he spoke about how when he is young and single, he can utilize the situation to make this happen so he can open the doors and have the salary development that he wants to have. However, this postponement can conflict with some of his other feelings. He spoke about how he wants to be a young father so that he can play with his children. Furthermore, he doesn't know how long it will take to have children or how easy it will be. Due to this desire to be a young father, there is a longing to have a child as he was about to turn 30 at the time of the interview. He continued to reflect on that there is a risk of not being able to have biological children as it could be that one is less fertile after 30, which would make him sad. Even though there is an increased risk of childlessness due to the postponement of family formation (Schmidt et al., 2012), Gustav is emotionally reflexive in the sense that he shapes his life in response to his emotions about having children. Having children without e.g. financial preconditions is an undesirable outcome, i.e. a fear to have them when he is not ready.

Magnus stood out in contrast to the other men. When asked if he feels ready to have children he responded: "110%, really 110%, so much. I could start tomorrow. So ready like, just do what has to be done. And I feel that I already do them half". These things that he already half does include that he has moved to a smaller city, and although he can enjoy the lifestyle of a bigger city, he felt that he functions better in this smaller city. He further expanded on this feeling of being ready, that he does not feel as lost as he could do in his early 20s. Now, he is also more aware of his strengths and weaknesses which makes him feel more ready. When he earlier described his thoughts about children in the future he said that, previously, he could feel depressed about the chronological order and that it was predetermined how life should develop. What eventually took him out of this depression was that he realized that he wants to be a father. Then, everything else started to feel easy, and he started to work towards this goal and how he needs to be as a person to become a father. About envisioning himself as a father he said

because I know what kind of father I want to be, so I did see so much happiness in it. And then everything else became, like, where you hunt position and at work and so on. It becomes so much easier to deal with somehow. There was not the same bitterness or something else like, because there was another larger goal. Which has made career and everything else go so much better. Because that value is not in hunting money anymore, but in creating a life with the preconditions to have a family in the future

He imagines that he would experience great sorrow if he would not be a father when he was 40. The reason for this prospective sorrow is that it was the realization that he wanted to become a father that took him out of his previous dip. This was based on the insight that having children and the “regular simple life with children” would give him meaning and happiness. The contrast between Magnus and the others is that Magnus has altered his life in response to his emotions while the others desire a continued engagement in the regime of exploration and their emotions make them preserve this.

As shown above, the men are reflexive about how their lives would change if children would come into their life now, which elicit emotions in them. As they shape their life in response to these emotions, they display emotional reflexivity. Holmes (2015b) argues that emotional reflexivity is that actors alter their life in response to emotions, although it is just Magnus that has shaped his life by altering it while the others preserve their current life. The desire to have children, but not right now, is mostly based on emotions of fear of losing their current freedom. But there are also prospective emotions of e.g. sadness and regret concerning having children too early as this could mean that the shift between youth and adulthood comes at an undesired time. This is in line with the promise of the acceleration, that one will be able to have as many experiences as possible and complete many different life projects (Rosa, 2010). Staying within the youthful freedom to explore, i.e. not shifting to adulthood too early, offers the possibility to have more experiences before and thus achieve a fulfilled life and the promise of the acceleration.

This fear of losing their freedom and the prospective emotions that most men felt if the shift from youth to adulthood would come too early indicates that they, at least currently, mostly want to engage with the future in the regime of exploration, which is line with the findings from Hviid Malling et al. (2022). The experienced pressure to explore everything that late modernity has to offer that Hviid Malling et al. (2022) found was not expressed by the men in this study. Rather, most men in this study feared losing the freedom to explore, i.e. to engage with the future in the regime of exploration, leading to preservation of their current lives. This is in line with the promise of late modernity and that we should be open and flexible (Rosa, 2014) and the men wanted to keep the possibility horizons open. Within these possibility horizons, family life was included but ‘not right now’ and rather at a later stage in life. However, Rosa (2010) argues that there will always be more options available than what one can realize in a life span which could lead to ever postponement of family formation. Although other studies have shown that the later one begins family formation, the higher the risk of involuntary childlessness becomes (Schmidt et al., 2012) the

men were still optimistic that this future family life would come to be, which is further developed below.

What is noteworthy here is that for most men the regime of exploration seems to interlace with the regime of familiarity. This is in line with the contraction of the present that Rosa (2010) argues for. The familiarity is only in the present, as the experiences and expectations have been contracted to this, and in the present, the men want to engage with the future through the regime of exploration. In the social acceleration then the envisioned family life is something far away, not part of the contracted present. Therefore, the engagement with the future is done in the regime of exploration leading to the feeling of desiring children in the future but ‘not right now’.

Growing up or staying young and explorative

A subtheme of ‘not right now’ is the notion of growing up and acting as an adult before one has children. This is also a justification for why these men should wait before having children, i.e. they engage with the future in the regime of justification. However, it is also based on a potential value judgment of others. Burkitt (2012) argues that we see ourselves through our imagination of how others see us and their potential value judgments, which regulate our behaviors. Acting as a grown-up is thus an internal dialogue populated with others, real or imagined, and how they view the men’s behavior.

Adam feels that he is currently acting rather immaturely, and he feels like he still acts as if he were 20. For him, this means going out drinking, doing various things with his friends, going to football games, or sitting by the computer playing games all night. It could also include skipping cooking a meal or skipping breakfast just to sleep in some extra. If he were to have a child, many of these things would have to be done less, and having a child would force him to grow up quickly. He said, “it would be a little scary because then I would have to, I would have to, yeah, grow up rather quick really. I could not be the same person I am today I think and be a family father”. He later reflects on that some of the same things could be done, but it would require more planning and cannot be done in the same spontaneous manner. Adam is here aware of his emotions about how it would be scary to have a child now as it would impact his life. But he also displays emotional reflexivity in the sense that others populate his inner dialogue. When he says that he acts rather immaturely and how this informs his view about how you should act if you have children, he does see himself through the eyes of others. Thus, there is a potential value judgment of these others, significant or generalized, about how one ought to act if one also is a father.

Just like Adam, Johan reflects on how one should act more grown-up before having children. He did for a long time feel that he did not act responsibly enough to meet all the possible challenges that a child would bring. Stating that he tends to think about worst-case scenarios, he previously did not feel that he was acting responsibly enough to meet these. He said that “I first need to keep a check on myself and then you can keep a check on a child”. Included in this ‘acting as an adult’ is also that you have a good daily cycle, do not oversleep, or mismanage your economy, you are not dependent on your parents, you are not tired because you disregard sleep or do not eat at set times. Johan felt that he previously had disregarded some of these aspects such as sleep and food, and he must get this under control before having a child. He also said that he wanted to have a good economy and housing as well as a stable job before having children, which also is part of acting as a grown-up. He said, “as long as I am in school I am not an adult”. Johan, just like Adam, views himself through the eyes of others and their potential value judgment as they could consider him not acting as a grown-up when having a child, displaying emotional reflexivity.

Markus has, for a big part of his life, not felt like a super-responsible person, especially in the sense of responsibility towards others. He said that “it has always felt very much like a burden in the way that there are many dangers with it the whole time, with responsibility”. This responsibility that he speaks of is a responsibility towards others. Now that he is in a committed relationship, he has been forced to take responsibility for the feelings and daily life of someone else. In his work as a teacher, he has also been forced to take more responsibility towards others, i.e. his students. This development has led to him feeling more like an adult and that he is more confident in this responsibility. He said

so I have probably also through that, these two processes so to speak. Cohabit with partner. And get this, have this permanent employment [...]. That I like, take responsibility for many people in another way. All of these things have done that I. To a much greater extent feel this [...] partly that I have strengthened my identity as an adult and responsibility

This feeling of growing and strengthening his identity as an adult is part of why he feels like he wants to have a child and is not as doubtful as before, and previously this notion of growing up brought feelings of anxiety. Growing up would come with societal expectations of steps one should take. These steps felt like he would get stuck and lose the freedom that e.g. means you can do what you want and go where you want which would feel troublesome and Markus said that “it becomes a little existential like, this how life will be”. This existential issue of becoming stuck is a manifestation of the promise of the acceleration as one loses the opportunities that are promised to increase (Rosa, 2014). Keeping this youthful freedom by

extensions allows you to stay open and flexible, i.e. you can continue to explore what the acceleration has to offer. There was a fear for Markus of losing this freedom and he said that he still feels that he may want to live in other places, e.g. abroad, indicating that this mode of exploration still exists in his engagement with the future. However, these things that have made him feel more like a grown-up and a responsible person, which have to a degree led to partly losing his freedom and becoming more stuck, are also what have made him feel more ready to have children and that he feels more ready every month. This increasing readiness and feeling a desire to have children within some years have also led to more fatherly feelings as he experiences joy when he spends time with a colleague's daughter. These fatherly feelings are also connected to feelings that others may see him as a good father.

Not acting as an adult is used as a justification for not having children right now. This can either be in the form of exploration, as in the case of Adam, that he still wants to be open to the exploration of his current life. But acting as an adult is also described as taking responsibility for oneself and others, in this case, a child. The justification of the 'waiting game' in the sense of acting more as an adult is an inner dialogue that is populated by the potential value judgments of others, real or imagined, displaying emotional reflexivity. An imagined value judgment would be that, if they had children now, others may see them as immature or not responsible enough to have a child. Due to this, they do not want to have children right now.

The envisioned family life: naturalized plans and current trajectories

Another general theme was that most of the men did envision a family life in the future. Many drew upon their own childhood experiences when reflecting upon this future family life and what was important in it, as well as why it was important for them to have a family in the future. As most envision a family life, yet want to remain in the regime of exploration, the men find themselves on different trajectories and naturalized plans at the same time.

For Niklas, having a family in the future always felt like something obvious although he did not want to have this now. The reason why it felt like something obvious is, in his mind, probably based on his own childhood experiences. This is something that he returns to at different times in the interviews. He said that

I think [...] why I see family life as something obvious in my future is, that I come from a large family myself. [...] And always liked to have much family around one, how much fighting and chaos and everything it may be, so have I always liked to have a large family. [...] I think I am very influenced by my own upbringing in this

Besides having a big family, the family life that he enjoyed when he was younger, growing up on a street with four families where all the kids were the same age, also influenced his desire for a future family. When asked if this life is something that he also dreams about he said “I can absolutely do that. I can absolutely do that. Like really”. Although he didn’t want to move back to his childhood city, he could dream about finding a similar area in Gothenburg. Yet he also noted that he was very lucky to have this and although he wishes this for his children, he notes that this alone may not lead to a happy childhood and that the fun upbringing of his children is not dependent on this. This envisioned family life is a naturalized plan for Niklas as it is part of his self-fulfillment, which is based on nostalgia from his childhood, and he just has to take the steps on the path. However, his current project is more of the other parts of his self-fulfillment, i.e. he is currently on a different trajectory.

Johan, who said that he has tendencies to think about worst-case scenarios and by this did see many risks with future children, also spoke about the happy family life as a potential outcome. When he describes this happy family life, he draws upon his childhood. Growing up in the countryside with separated parents and far from his friends he said

so I had really an idealized image of living on a street with nuclear families and then you could go out and play floorball on a paved fucking road, like. I think that is happiness. So I see [...] that family dream and going on vacations together and having some nuclear family feeling

Based on his own experiences he had an idealized picture of how it would be to live on a street full of nuclear families, in contrast to how he had it with families living in different places, which informs his ideas about family life in the future. He spoke fondly about birthdays and small trips, as well as looking at different tv-shows on a Friday evening, feeling that this was cozy. As he is a nature person, he also looked forward to being able to go on hikes and canoeing with his children in the future. Together, it all forms his ideas about a family life in the future, which is based on a nostalgic feeling of his childhood. Some of the nostalgia comes from what he did with his own family. But it also comes from how he imagines that nuclear family life could be which is in contrast to the family life he grew up in. Just like in the case of Niklas, the future family life is a naturalized plan for Johan, but his current project is one of exploration. Thus, he also finds himself on different trajectories and naturalized plans.

Gustav also drew upon his childhood when reflecting on what was important in family life. As noted in previous sections, he wanted to give his children the best possible conditions which included having financial stability as it is expensive to have children. When reflecting on this, he thought back on how hard his parents worked to be able to afford trips to

e.g. Thailand or the US for him and his brothers. Although he noted that these had been great experiences for him, the expensive travels were not what he most fondly remembers now. Rather it was the less expensive vacations such as camping on the Swedish west coast with the family. About these vacations, he said, “[t]hat is like, that is probably what I am most like. Happy to have experienced with the family and my brothers and mom and dad. But right then when you were young you didn’t really understand that”. Although he also speaks about how it may be nice for both himself and his future children to be able to do the kind of bigger travels, he also said that it really is about being together.

money and like experience. Yeah, it ties together. But it like is also something that you understand later like that yeah, but it really is. It is actually what it is about. It is about being together. It is not about going to some cool country, like being able to come home and tell and show pictures to one’s friends

What is evident here is a conflict between what is important for Gustav. He does want to put in the work now that he is single to better his financial situation so that he can afford things like traveling. However, he notes that what is important to him is being together with the family, which can be done on cheaper vacations. The more expensive vacations are described as something cool to talk about and show your friends pictures of. Just like most of the other men, Gustav finds himself on different trajectories and naturalized plans. The naturalized plan is for him a family life, in many ways based on nostalgia. However, his current trajectory is, like the others, one of exploration in terms of career and developing financial situation.

Mandich (2020) argues that in the regime of the plan, we engage with the future through a mean-to-an-end form of agency. Thus, we must make choices and then we decide against many others (Rosa, 2014), which most of the men are reluctant to do as they want to be open and flexible. The increasing speed of social change makes it threatening to develop a life plan (Rosa, 2010). Magnus stood out as he does engage with the imagined future family life through a plan, he has already taken some of the steps identified and closed off some others. For the others, the envisioned family life, often based on nostalgia and experiences from their childhood, is part of a naturalized plan that will come about eventually, they just have to take the steps on an assumed path (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). However, the trajectory for most men is currently one of exploration where children and family life do not have a place right now. A trajectory can be an individual’s project and is not disconnected from the cultural framework (Tavory & Eliasoph, 2013). The cultural framework that trajectories are connected to is the promise of the acceleration, which is further outlined below. What influences most of the men’s trajectory is the promise of the acceleration (Rosa, 2010). In a

sense, the current trajectories of the men are part, not of their naturalized plan in terms of the envisioned family life, but rather part of the trajectory of late modernity and social acceleration. Tavory and Elisaoph (2013, p. 937) argue that “[t]rajectories can become institutionalized and naturalized, whether or not actors plan for them to become so”. The regime of exploration has thus become a naturalized trajectory in late modernity due to the social acceleration. The family life and ‘not right now’ are trajectories and naturalized plans that could conflict with each other, but it is possible for actors to be on different trajectories and naturalized plans at the same time if the actions can make sense on both. It is the optimism that the family life will eventually come about that makes it possible for the men to be on these different trajectories and naturalized plans at the same time. The emotion of optimism is therefore central to the men’s coordinate of their anticipated future and makes it possible for them to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration. For Magnus however, the trajectory is a plan, not exploration. His trajectory and naturalized plan are thus more attached than for the other men.

[Optimism: assuring oneself one can keep exploring and have a family life later](#)

Besides emotions of fear and prospective sadness and regret, there was also optimism that the family life the men envision will eventually come about. Optimism can be defined as it “implies a forecast of success because goal attainment is considered probable” (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010, p. 261) and it may be about both controllable and uncontrollable events. Although most men wanted biological children, many of them also said that they could see themselves adopting. Some also felt optimistic about fertility treatments and that their partners would be able to become pregnant.

Daniel said that if he were to approach the age of 30 or 35 he would feel like something was missing if he didn’t have children at the time and it would feel wrong. When asked to expand upon this, he also said that it could develop into worrying about whether it would be possible for him and his partner to have children. But he displayed optimism that family life will come for them, saying

it is of course, becomes somewhat reassuring since my partner after all became pregnant when I was 19 so we know that, yes, it is possible but at the same time that was six years ago so anything can of course have happened. But then you have to, then you have to look at other options

Here, Daniel does display optimism that he and his partner will be able to have children but at the same time shows awareness of possible limitations. However, these limitations of biological children could be overcome through other options of having children.

Gustav did, like Daniel, show awareness of possible limitations to having biological children due to age. It is not something that he has thought much about, but when he did during the interview he said “but if I think about it now that it wouldn’t work. Yeah then, then it just is like that. Then there are other ways to go simply, even if it of course would be really sad”. He later returns to this, saying that although he would prefer biological children, he is open to e.g. adoption or freezing of sperm to use for injection. About these other options, Gustav also reflected in a previous section on the possibility of doing this as a single man. Although he thinks this can be hard, he still considers this as something that he could try if he didn’t have a partner. Here, the optimism is again displayed through having other options to have children, even if it would be sad if he didn’t have biological children.

Niklas did say that he could feel some stress about having children, not something that always is present but when he talks about it. He develops this to say that he sometimes feels that the order to do things is a little weird because children have a somewhat clear time limit and you cannot wait forever. He also said that you can never know if it is possible to have biological children or not. About the limitations and the feeling of the order being weird, he later clarifies that this is about biological children and that he is open to having children through other options. He said

I [can] also add that, that what somewhere makes me quite confident in, confident in this after all is that I don’t have any. I don’t feel any, [...] limitations around it or such [...] I don’t feel that it must be my biological children. But, I could see myself adopting. [...] So that perhaps also ease a little that makes that stress [...] maybe dampen itself a little

As Niklas continues to engage with the future in the regime of exploration and postpone children due to this, he does feel some stress. But as he, like many others, can see himself adopting he can feel confident and optimistic that children and family life will come about, allowing him to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration.

When the men envision a future family life but don’t want it right now, they still display “a forecast of success because goal attainment is considered probable” (Miceli & Castelfranchi, 2010, p. 261). This forecast of success is displayed through having other options for family life or feeling confident that the partner can become pregnant. Thus, there is optimism that the future family life will come to be even if the men don’t put themselves on this path right now. Through this optimism, the men can manage the prospective sadness or regret that starting a family life too early would mean, as well as the fear of losing the freedom that the regime of exploration allows for. Optimism is therefore also part of their emotional reflexivity which allows the men to preserve their current lives and continue to

engage with the future in the regime of exploration and strive towards the promise of the acceleration. It is the optimism that makes it possible for the men's current actions and preservation of their current lives to make sense on different trajectories and naturalized plans.

Emotional reflexivity of not talking to partners: fear of misunderstandings and over-committing

The last theme is that the men did not, generally, speak with their partners and potential partners about their feelings about having children. Some of the men had spoken to their partners, but this was often concerning how they would want children in the future but not right now. Speaking about fears and dreams of family life was often not done. When talking about why they did not speak with their partners and potential partners, the men displayed emotional reflexivity, as they imagined the emotional response of the other person. They also displayed reflexivity in how talking about it could label the relationship and where it was heading.

Niklas, who is single, said that, although children are part of his self-fulfillment, he is currently fulfilling other parts which will allow him to later meet the right partner to have children with and have the life he wants, i.e. he doesn't want children right now. About his dating, Niklas said that he is very happy in his everyday life and himself, but he is also someone who enjoys being in a relationship. However, his current dating is not based on his feelings about a future with children, and he tends to date and appreciate people who think like him. He said

and as even if you maybe really want to go towards something short-term in order to not be limited to not put out. Yeah, put yourself or wind up in a situation where you, where you are dependent on someone else, yet you at the same time have many things that you need to do on your own.

Later he speaks about how it is also important to be in a relationship for some time so that it feels right before having children would be actualized so that you have a good foundation for the relationship. He then said that "that can of course clash a little with exactly that, yeah. That comment that I have had now", referring to his current dating and how it is not related to his feelings about the future and children. When asked about how it would feel to talk to people he dates about this, he said that he would not feel any hardships about talking about his feelings as he describes himself as an open book. But it is not a question that he moves towards either. He also said

but there are still some things that you don't talk about within a certain time and when you start to talk about certain thoughts, feelings, ideas so, so you somewhere put, it can or it can be perceived

as you put certain ideas about what type of relationship this is and where the relationship is heading

In Niklas's account above, he imagines how someone he dates would emotionally respond and judge the situation if he were to talk about his feelings about having children. As this imaginative response clashes with his current self-fulfillment of exploration, it elicits emotions in him. The elicited emotion in him could be one of fear as he does not want to become dependent on someone and putting labels on where the relationship is heading could thus be an undesirable outcome.

Adam, who is single, said that sometimes when he dates, the question of children could come up but then it is not a deep conversation about the future but rather simply if one wants children to which the response is yes. If it were to be talked about more deeply, it would have to be with someone with whom he feels that it could develop into something serious, and not on e.g. a Tinder date as meeting someone on Tinder feels quite shallow. This conversation is especially not something that he thought should be brought up on a first date. Although, if the girl were to ask him, he said that he would feel comfortable talking about it. When asked how he imagined that it would feel to talk about it on a date he said

Adam: I wouldn't have any problems with it, but for me. I think it would feel like coming on too strong to talk with a girl on, [...] the first date,

Interviewer: Like, that she would feel that it is coming on too strong?

Adam: Yeah, exactly. That's what I think, but it doesn't have to be true.

In other parts of the interview, Adam did speak about how for him it is important who he starts the family life with, and while he does not feel pressure to start the family life it could change if he meets the right person. He said, "I take it little like this [...] take it as it comes (på uppstuds) [...] it is not the first I think about when I meet a girl, so to speak".

In the accounts from both Niklas and Adam, as well as for the other single men, they engage in their dating in the regime of exploration. They want to be open and flexible so that they can discover the right person to have a relationship with and then form the family life that they envision. At the same time, talking about this future with potential partners could, in the words of Niklas, put certain labels on it and where it is heading, or it could mean that you come on too strong as Adam said. Not talking about it with their dates thus not only allows for them to engage in dating in the regime of exploration, but it also allows for them to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration generally. Talking about the desired future of family life and children could mean that the current exploration is limited as they put themselves more towards the envisioned family life, i.e. it would mean that making a

choice is to decide against others. Emotional reflexivity is shown by the men as their dates populate their inner dialogue in the form that the men imagine the emotional responses from the person they date and how these dates would judge the situation of talking about children.

Fredrik, who is in a relationship, said that he and his partner had mentioned the question of children, to which he had responded that he probably want to have children. However, he said that they had not talked about it deeply like during the interview. As described in previous sections, Fredrik did not want to have children right now. When asked about how it would feel to talk about it with his partner he said “I would probably be a little worried that she maybe would be like this. Yeah, but feel that oh, isn’t he sure, isn’t he sure about it because it is with me or because it is with children”. He goes on to talk about how she would possibly think that it is she that does something wrong, and therefore it is easier to talk about this ‘not right now’ and children in the future with his friends. He does clarify that it is because of the general uncertainty of not right now and not because he does not want it with his girlfriend. When asked to expand upon this, he said that he really likes his girlfriend, but they have not been going out for that long. He continues to say “but it becomes of course also one thing that day that you have children with a person, then you are [...] bound to that person in fact in a way for the rest of your life”. He then states that “if it becomes children so could I absolutely have children with her”. However, he continues to reflect on that in whatever way he talks about this, regardless of how clear he is that it is his reflections, he thinks that she will be doubting if he just feels it in general or if it is with her, therefore it would be hard to have this discussion.

In Fredrik’s account, imagining the emotional response of his partner is a response that worries him, and therefore he does not talk to his partner about it. This was true for many of the other men in relationships as well. Thus, they are emotionally reflexive as the emotional responses of their partner populate their inner dialogues and they regulate themselves according to this. Furthermore, Fredrik spoke about how having children with someone will bind you to this person, which also others spoke of. Using the term being bound to someone stands in contrast with being open and flexible as we ought to be in late modernity (Rosa, 2014). Talking about children with your partner could thus put you on the path towards having children, which would limit the freedom to engage in the exploration. But it would also bind you to a person, which stands in contrast to the regime of exploration and the openness and flexibility that is desired in the social acceleration. Furthermore, it shows that the men currently find themselves on different trajectories and naturalized plans, where the family life is a distant naturalized plan that they do not act towards right now in the sense of

speaking about it with their partners. But as displayed in the previous section, there is optimism that family life will come about later, allowing the men to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration and not talk about it with their partners. Emotional reflexivity is thus displayed in considering the emotions of the other, but also that there are emotions of fear and optimism tied to bringing up the subject of children and that the men shape their life in response to this, in this case leading to not talking about it.

The accounts above could also be analyzed from other aspects, e.g. of conflicting plans. If the men have another plan compared to their partners which potentially clashes, how are these negotiated. However, due to limitations, this cannot be further explored in this thesis.

Concluding discussion

This study does not attempt to address the possible childlessness of any individual. However, it seeks to further the understanding of why childlessness has increased in later years by showing that the ‘waiting game’ is not just a product of economic constraints and diminishing opportunities as Ravanera and Beaujot (2014) suggests. Rather, the ‘waiting game’ is also part of the social acceleration, and that, mostly, the men desire to engage with the future in the regime of exploration when engaging with the future which is in line with the promise of the acceleration, that one can have as many experiences as possible within one life span (Rosa, 2010), answering RQ1. Emotions of fear, prospective sadness and regret, as well as optimism regarding having children shape the men’s life and makes most of them preserve their current lifestyles so that they can continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration. Although one altered his life in response to emotions about having children, answering RQ2. The men are also shown to be reluctant to talk to partners and potential partners about their emotions and ideas about children, due to fears of being misunderstood, but also that this could mean putting a label on the relationship and where it is heading. Talking about it could thus lead to the limitation of the freedom that is currently desired, answering RQ3.

The men in this study talked about finishing education, establishing careers, and finding places to live, before having children the chronological order is evident here, supporting the findings from Jensen (2016) and Hviid Malling et al. (2022) and the ‘waiting game’ (Ravanera & Beaujot, 2014). However, in contrast to previous research, this study shows that most of the men desire to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration. It further shows that this is guided by emotional reflexivity as fear of losing the freedom to explore and the optimism that family life will come about are emotions that make

most of the men preserve their current lives. The desire to engage with the future in the regime of exploration and the fear to lose the freedom to do so is in line with the ideal that a good life is a fulfilled life with as many experiences as possible (Rosa, 2010). Ravanera and Beaujot (2014) argue that men may become childless not by choice but due to the ‘waiting game’. However, the question of what a choice is can be raised. Following the argument from Barbalet (1998) that emotions and rationality are not divided but rather continuous, it can be argued that continuing to engage with the future in the regime of exploration and postponing family formation is a choice guided by emotions. By extension then, if this leads to childlessness, the question if this is by choice, guided by emotions, or not can thus be raised. By adding a temporal and emotional perspective of how the men’s engagement with the future in the regime of exploration, and how they coordinate their anticipated futures, is an emotional reflexive process this thesis furthers the understanding of how the promise of the acceleration could be a driving force of the ‘waiting game’. Thus it adds theoretical understanding of the ‘waiting game’ and the risk of childlessness due to postponement of family formation (Hammarberg et al., 2017; Schmidt et al., 2012).

The pressure to explore everything that life has to offer, which Hviid Malling et al. (2022) argue to be tied to late modernity and reflexivity is not found to be supported in this study. Rather, there was some experienced pressure from partners and the chronological order, but then in the sense that the chronological order would limit the possibilities to explore. This is expressed as the fear of losing their current freedom to explore other parts of their self-fulfillment as well as e.g. exploring where to start their career, exploring where to live, and going on spontaneous trips. Ravanera and Beaujot (2014) argue that the ‘waiting game’ is a result of structural constraints, e.g. diminishing opportunities for economic stability, which are not to be neglected. Although as Rosa (2010) argues, there will always be more options available in the acceleration than what is possible to realize in a lifetime. Therefore, addressing the ‘waiting game’ with policies in the economy as Ravanera and Beaujot (2014) suggest may then not lead to the men feeling ready earlier. Rather, the promise of the acceleration may continue to influence the men to engage with the future in the regime of exploration and continue to explore e.g. self-fulfillment, career, and places to live. The fear of losing the freedom to explore, which is in line with this promise, may thus continue to drive a postponement of children.

This thesis has suggested that the promise of the acceleration could be a driving force for postponing family formation which could be one reason for why there have been an increasing number of childless men at later ages in life, which needs to be explored further. It

also argues that this is an emotionally reflexive process as emotions such as fear and optimism make most men preserve their current lifestyle, i.e. to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration. The emotion of optimism also guides the men's coordination of anticipated futures. Future research could explore if other emotions guide men's reflexivity about children in the future and how they engage with their futures. As noted in the introduction, this topic could be approached from various theoretical standpoints e.g. gender, which future research could address. This thesis has argued that men want to continue to engage with the future in the regime of exploration where children have a place at a later stage in life. It could be explored if this is a masculine notion about children in the future or not. Future research could also explore if there are gendered divisions in how long one feels that one could engage with the future in the regime of exploration in contrast to starting family formations.

In conclusion, this thesis has furthered the understanding of the 'waiting game' both theoretically and empirically as emotions guide most of the men to preserve a current lifestyle in which they engage with the future in the regime of exploration. This preservation allows them to strive for the promise of the social acceleration, which influences their reflections about having children.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – interview guide

Syfte	Fråga	Underfråga	Anteckningar
Bygga lite förtroende genom småfrågor/bakgrundsfrågor i början	Vad för utbildningsnivå har du? Vad jobbar du med? Hur gammal är du? Var bor du och var är du uppväxt?		
Berätta om projektet och hur jag kom in på detta från början, dvs var lite personlig			
	Vad är din relationsstatus idag?		
Ta reda på om dom vill ha barn eller inte	Vill du berätta om dina tankar kring att ha barn och hur dom ser ut idag?		
Reflektioner om framtiden	Om du istället föreställer dig i framtiden, hur ser dina tankar ut kring att barn då?	Vad tänker du om din tankar/känslor som uppstår när du föreställer dig din framtid som förälder? Tänker du något kring hur andra ser på dig och dina tankar om att bli förälder?	
	Varför är detta viktigt för dig/inte så viktigt för dig?		
	Hur känns det när du tänker på/föreställer dig liver som		

	familjefar?		
	Känner du dig redo att skaffa barn?	Hur känns det när du föreställer dig som redo/inte är redo för det?	
Känslor kring den kronologiska ordningen	Hur känner du kring den här ordningen kring att man skaffa utbildning, bostad och barn i rätt ordning?		Ställ denna om de pratar om ordningen
	Om du föreställer dig att din partner/någon du träffar skulle bli gravid idag, hur känns det?		
Barnskaffande i relation till andras tankar	Hur tänker du att andra ser på dig om du blir förälder/inte blir förälder?		
Barnskaffande i relation till andras tankar	Pratar du med andra i din direkta närhet om dina tankar kring att skaffa barn?	<p>Vilka? Varför/varför inte?</p> <p>Vänner? Familj?</p> <p>Om singel: är du öppen mot andra som du träffar om det?</p> <p>Om relation: pratar du med din partner om det? Varför/varför inte? Vill din partner ha barn?</p>	Om det berättas om att det pratas mest praktiskt om det, fråga hur det känns. Samt fråga hur det känns om det skulle vara så att de föreställer sig att prata mer känslomässigt om det
	Om du föreställer dig att du skulle prata med andra om detta, hur känns det hos dig?		

Appendix 2 – Information for participants, informed consent

Information till forskningspersoner

I det här dokumentet får du information om studentprojektet Mäns reflektioner om barn i framtiden för en Master uppsats och vad det innebär att delta i detta. Master projektet görs av Andreas Jonsson med ansvarig handledare Karl Malmqvist, doktor i sociolog vid Institutionen för Sociologi och Arbetsvetenskap vid Göteborgs universitet.

Vad är det för projekt och varför vill ni att jag ska delta?

Projektet Mäns reflektioner om barn i framtiden handlar om hur män reflekterar över sin framtid som potentiella föräldrar, oavsett om man är säker på att man vill ha barn eller inte. Detta är intressant att titta på då, även om det inte är någon större skillnad mellan män och kvinnor i önskan att skaffa barn så är fler män än kvinnor barnlösa och det i allmänhet saknas mycket forskning kring att inte vara pappa. Jag kontaktar dig för att vi är intresserade av dina tankar och reflektioner om att potentiellt skaffa barn i framtiden.

Hur går studien till?

Om du vill delta blir du intervjuad på lämplig plats i uppskattningsvis mellan 45 och 60 minuter. Ditt namn och personliga detaljer är konfidentiella och kommer inte att användas muntligt eller skriftligt i någon text som studien leder till och obehöriga har inte tillgång till dina uppgifter. Jag skulle vilja spela in intervjun för att ha möjlighet att lyssna på den och skriva ner den efteråt. Intervjufilen kommer förvaras på en lösenordskyddad dator. Ditt namn kommer inte att synas på någon av dessa filer – bara en pseudonym som döljer din identitet.

Om du ångrar dig kan du när som helst välja att avsluta sitt deltagande. När studiens resultat presenteras och publiceras på GUPEA vid Göteborgs universitet kommer alla deltagares identitet skyddas med hjälp av en pseudonym.

Vad händer med mina uppgifter?

Det insamlade materialet kommer att användas för att skriva en Master uppsats och materialet kommer att diskuteras på seminarium. Informationen hålles i säkert förvar och är endast tillgänglig för relevant student och handledare. Dina svar kommer att pseudonymiseras så att inte obehöriga kan ta del av dem. När studien är färdig kommer materialet, både inspelade intervjuer samt transkribering av dom, att förstöras.

Hur får jag information om resultatet av studien?

Resultaten kommer publiceras i en Master uppsats som blir färdig 5 juni, 2023. Deltagare kan ladda ner uppsatsen via GUPEA <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/>

Deltagandet är frivilligt

Ditt deltagande är frivilligt och samtycke ges muntligt och skriftligt. Du har möjlighet att ställa frågor om projektet innan du signerar ett 'samtyckesformulär'. Om du ångrar

dig kan du när som helst välja att avsluta sitt deltagande under pågående intervju och du behöver inte uppge varför du inte längre vill delta. Du har också rättighet att radera uppgifter i efterhand.

Kontakt detaljer

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Appendix 3 – table of respondents

Name	Age	Relationship status
Adam	30	Single
Daniel	25	Partner
Fredrik	29	Partner
Gustav	30	Single
Johan	30	Partner
Magnus	31	Single
Markus	28	Partner
Niklas	24	Single
Sebastian	29	Partner