Love and Family: Discussions Between Swedish Men and Women Concerning the Transition to Parenthood

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Abstract: This study is an exploration of how young Swedish adults talk about intimate relationships and the transition to parenthood. It is suggested that people carefully reflect over their relationship with their partner before deciding to embark on parenthood, and it is shown that reproductive decision making is imbued with contradictory ideals that may cause stress and anxiety. To have and to raise a child in a nuclear family arrangement is one prominent ideal that is illuminated by this study, but parallel with this is the notion of intimate relationships breaking down, dwindling. These two discourses are contradictory and create dilemmas in the process of family formation. Some individuals find the risk of relationship dissolution especially stressful, drawing on their own childhood experiences of growing up with separated parents. This is a study based on focus group interviews containing men and women, ranging from 24 to 39 years old, with different educational, occupational and geographical backgrounds; some are parents and some are not. The data are analysed using a discourse analytical approach, and much of the discussion is based on Anthony GIDDENS', Zygmunt BAUMAN's and Ulrich BECK and Elisabeth BECK-GERNSHEIM's reasoning about love and intimacy in the contemporary Western world.

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1. Introduction

This is a study of how young Swedish adults talk about intimate relationships, family and parenthood. In Sweden, as in so many other western countries, relationship dissolution and divorce are common phenomena. The rate of union dissolution in families with children has radically increased during the last two decades. Today, 63 percent of 17-year-olds live with both original parents. Of those who do not, the majority have separated parents (Statistics Sweden Demographic Report, 2003, 1.2). This article emanates from a research study that is part of the project "Family and working life in the 21st century" with Eva BERNHARDT, Stockholm University, as the primary investigator. The overall goal of the project is to gain broader knowledge of reproductive decision-making and cultural ideals relating to life course, lifestyle, parenthood and the value of having children, by combining quantitative and qualitative methods and different theoretical frameworks. This article presents data from the qualitative component of the project in which focus group interviews have been conducted. Similar to BERNHARDT's work based on two mail questionnaire surveys (2000a, 2000b), the young adults in my study refer to a number of factors influencing the decisions about when to enter into or why to postpone parenthood. A lot of emphasis is placed upon "doing other things first" and being able to focus first and foremost on oneself. To find the right partner and to get to know this person properly before trying for a child is also recurrently stressed (in BERNHARDT's survey as well as in the focus groups. See also FAGERBERG, 2000 and Statistics Sweden Demographic Report, 2001, 1). The purpose of this article is to explore the emphasis the Swedish adults participating in the focus groups put on union stability. [1]

2. The Nuclear Family and the Intimate Relationship

There are studies that indicate that there may be an increasing trend in the Western world towards alternative ways of "doing family" (see for example ROSENEIL & BUDGEON, 2004; ROSENEIL, 2000; BAK, 2003). Men and women may choose other social relationships and networks for intimacy, love and care rather than that of living and raising children in a traditional nuclear family with two parents and their mutual children. However, the nuclear family ideal still predominates in the contemporary Western world (BERLANT & WARNER, 2000), and Swedish studies confirm this picture. Despite the fact that a person who is single is not looked upon dubiously ("singlehood" may even be regarded as an attractive option at some stages in life), a predominant goal is to find Ms/Mr Right and to become a couple, and possibly at some stage to have children together (ENGWALL, 2005). Parents who do not raise their children in a nuclear family, owing to, for example, separation or homosexuality, are affected by this ideal. Some may choose to organise their lives differently. Others (by finding a new partner and/or arranging the household and reproduction around the ideal of "a couple") achieve a family grounded on the nuclear family model, although of a somewhat different nature (BAK, 2003; ZETTERQVIST NELSON, 2006; see also SIMPSON, 1997). Official statistics on the number of children support the claim that the nuclear family is the dominating norm in Sweden. Although divorce and

separation are anything but rare phenomena in the Swedish society of today, the most common arrangement for a child is to grow up with both original (biological or adoptive) parents. Approximately 70 percent of children in Sweden live in a traditional nuclear family—young children to a greater extent and older children to a lesser extent (Statistics Sweden Demographic reports, 2003, 1.2). [2]

Parallel to the nuclear family ideal, young Swedish adults are influenced by the notion of dual-earner dual-carer families (FLORIN & NILSSON, 2000). Caring for and minding the child is not regarded as primarily a woman's duty and right, and Swedish mothers participate in the paid labour force almost to the same extent as fathers. Notions of what motherhood and fatherhood imply have thus changed quite radically over the last 30 years (OHLANDER, 1994; CHRONHOLM, 2004, BERGMAN & HOBSON, 2002). The child is viewed as a mutual responsibility, both with regard to emotional and physical care and with regard to financial provision (BERNHARDT, 2005). [3]

A child is not only the parents' mutual responsibility. Swedish studies indicate that a child serves as a symbol of a good relationship and of the parents' commitment to each other; the child becomes a project that bonds (LUNDQVIST & ROMAN, 2003; BÄCK-WIKLUND & BERGSTEN, 1997). However, the arrival of the child does not necessarily affect the relationship between the parents favourably. On the contrary, it has been shown that the transition to parenthood in many cases decreases marital satisfaction (SHAPIRO, GOTTMAN & CARRÈRE, 2000; WADSBY & SYDSJÖ, 2001). With the child as the main focus, demanding constant care and attention, and as a new object of love, less affection may be shared between the partners, causing strains on the relationship (BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 1995). In a British study based on in-depth interviews, one experience of the transition to parenthood expressed by both men and women is the negative effect it had on the relationship (GATRELL, 2005), and although not as explicitly stated this is also a finding in an interview study of Swedish couples (KUGELBERG, 1999). [4]

Why, then, may the transition to parenthood induce strains on the relationship? This is a question of great magnitude, but by referring to late modern theorists such as GIDDENS (1992), BECK and BECK-GERNSHEIM (1995, 2002) and BAUMAN (2001, 2003), who talk about an increasing individualisation in contemporary societies, it is possible to isolate some significant characteristics of partner relationships in the Western world to use when discussing parenthood and union dissolution. Men and women today are influenced by the notions of self-fulfilment and of having a life of one's own. A person should be a committed worker as well as devoted mother/father, lover and friend (BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 1995, 2002; GIDDENS, 1992, see also KUGELBERG, 1999). A relationship may restrain the individual's freedom to "live one's own life", and with two people (in the dual earner, dual carer family) trying to fulfil themselves through work, education and leisure time activities the relationship may be hard to sustain (BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 1995; BAUMAN, 2003). Parallel to this is what BECK and BECK-GERNSHEIM (1995) call the new meaning of life, which is to find "true love". Love is "the new centre round which our detraditionalized life

revolves" (1995, p.3), and love is regarded as the way to happiness. The search for intimacy and love in a partner relationship increases, BECK and BECK-GERNSHEIM argue, in individualised societies where "other social bonds seem too tenuous or unreliable" (1995, p.24). But attainment of love and intimate relationships is more difficult than ever. Love is defined and influenced by a romantic, conflict-free ideal, and this does not correlate well with individual experiences (BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 1995). As GILLIS (1996) concludes in his study on family life: A person has two kinds of families, one she/he lives by in her/his mind, which is founded on myths and rituals and freed of strains, and the one she/he lives *with*, which is the unstable, conflict ridden family of everyday life. The ambivalence the two families result in is a prominent characteristic of late modern family life. [5]

Intimate relationships are hard to sustain due to problems with realising and maintaining the ideals of what should signify this kind of relationship. According to GIDDENS (1992), people today enter a relationship with the expectation that the relationship will give intimacy, sexual pleasure and emotional support. A predominating notion is that a relationship should be based on love, trust and equity with no regulations other than to last as long as both people involved desire. Thus, individuals committed to a romantic relationship are aware of that it may not be forever (BAUMAN, 2003). This causes feelings of stress, anxiety, insecurity and loss of self-esteem, and questions such as: Do I fulfil my obligation? Do I love my partner as much as he/she loves me? Am I a good enough person/partner? (GIDDENS, 1992) When a couple enters parenthood, or are thinking about having a child, concerns of this sort may increase. Having a child means having to reflect over discourses about what is in the best interest of the child (BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 1995). Having said this, my study aims at uncovering the discourses young adults of today draw on when they think about family formation. I also want to better understand how the individual social actor positions herself/himself within the range of life-course opportunities in contemporary Sweden. [6]

3. The Focus Group Data

3.1 Conduct and composition of focus groups

Throughout the last two decades, the focus group method has gained increased recognition within the social sciences (MORGAN, 1997). A focus group is a group interview based on the premise that the moderator's (interviewer's) questions generate discussion. In contrast to individual interviews the moderator takes the role of an observer, relying on the questions to result in free-flowing interaction and conversation (MORGAN, 1998; see also KUGELBERG, 2000). The goal with a focus group is to see how people reason and discuss a given topic and how they agree with and/or oppose accounts of other participants (MORGAN 1998). One benefit of the focus group method is that the participants may not always be aware of their opinions until they discuss a topic with others. The group interaction may "present the need to explain or defend one's perspective to someone who thinks about the world differently. Using focus groups to create

such interactions gives the researcher a set of observations that is difficult to obtain through other methods" (MORGAN, 1997, p.46). Focus group interviews are context dependent data. The data are constructed in the setting of a certain group of people and under certain circumstances. When analysing and presenting the data, this needs to be acknowledged. [7]

MORGAN (1997) suggests that a focus group is homogeneously composed. Similar life situations serve to put the participants at ease with each other and to allow them to discuss in a free flowing manner. The focus group interviews that were conducted for this study were composed accordingly. In each group the participants had some or several of the following background characteristics in common: educational and/or professional background, area of residence, network of friends and/or acquaintances, age, gender, and the experience of rather recently becoming first time parents or of not having any children. Between the groups, on the other hand, the participants had varying backgrounds. The purpose with recruiting people with different educational, professional and geographical backgrounds was to reach people with different experiences and interests. Some of the focus groups contained participants living in the countryside or in small villages, some men and women residing in smaller and middle-size towns, and still others who lived in what for Sweden would be termed large cities. Some of the participants had a university or college degree and others a high school degree. Some were students at a university/college and some were working. Two of the participants were unemployed. [8]

The strategy for recruiting focus group participants was a "purposive snowball sampling". The participants were recruited in a number of ways: some were acquaintances of friends; some were contacted through their work; some through studies (university/college); and some through the place where they went for check-ups and parental classes after giving birth. I tried to recruit participants who were 25 years of age or older. This age restriction was based on the assumption that men and women in Sweden, in general, do not plan on entering parenthood much younger than 25 (although obviously there are exceptions) since the mean age of first time mothers is 29 and of first time fathers is approximately 31. The choice to include people with no children as well as people who had recently had a first child made it possible to ask slightly different questions to those who were not yet parents and those who actually had decided to enter parenthood. [9]

The discussion in the article emanates from nine focus group interviews that were conducted in different parts of Sweden in 2002 and 2003. A total of thirty-five individuals between 24 and 39 years of age participated in the focus groups, 12 men and 23 women. The number of participants in each group varied from two to seven, and the interviews lasted 1.5 to two hours. Twelve of the participants were first time parents with a child between three weeks and twenty months old. Three individuals were expecting their first child at the time of the interview. The remaining twenty were not parents (see Appendix). With the exception of one person who had been adopted from a foreign country, all participants were Swedish with no recent immigrant background. All interviews were tape-recorded

and transcribed, and the names of the participants are pseudonyms to guarantee anonymity. [10]

The following group guidelines for discussion were used: Why do you think the mean age for first time parents has increased when comparing the 1970s with a mean age of approximately 23 to 25 years of age, and the early 21st century with an average age of approximately 29 for women and 31 for men? Is a child something you anticipate having at some stage in life? Why? Why not? Was having a child something you anticipated long before you decided to try for one? Why did you decided to try for a child when you did? How do/did you imagine life as a parent compared to life without a child? What do you know about the parental leave system and family allowances? Will you/did you calculate the cost of having a child before trying for one? How do/did you look upon you/your partner being pregnant? How do/did you look upon the delivery? These were the questions that guided the focus group moderation. As can be seen, there was no specific question about parenthood and the intimate relationship. This reflects my ignorance prior to the focus groups of how significant this subject was to the focus group participants, and partly mirrors the demographic field where reproductive decision making is studied foremost in relation to welfare state, income, employment, and education. After having conducted a couple of groups, however, it became clear that the romantic partnership and possible consequences parenthood may have on it was a dominant theme and frequently brought up. Benefits of the focus group method that for instance MORGAN (1997, 1998) illuminates are thus evident in my data. The participants were often forced to reflect over their standpoints, to elaborate on and motivate their answers, and to discuss issues they previously had not thought much about, and so was I. While some of my questions to the groups were never broadly discussed, others were initiated by the participants, such as that of the intimate relationship and the ideal family. [11]

3.2 Analysing discourse and subject positioning

The analytical approach of my study is to look at how the interviewees illuminate and portray certain phenomena and how they position themselves in the focus group discussions. That is, I study evident discourses in people's dialogue. I wish to explore the particular ways in which the focus group participants use, oppose, and affirm certain discourses. I use discourse in correspondence with WEEDON (1987) and MAUTHNER and HEY (1999), who are, in turn, influenced by Michel FOUCAULT. From this point of view discourses are meaning-making systems that are embodied in talk, thoughts and practices. Discourses constitute subjects and are simultaneously constructed and reconstructed by subjects. The meanings and dominance of a discourse are dynamic in that there is a struggle for power between different individuals and institutions to define right and wrong, normal and abnormal, good and bad. A person positions herself, positions others and is positioned by others in relation to available discourses and in a "struggle for power". Different discourses may be contradictory. This means that people's lives and experiences are influenced by contradictions and dilemmas (DAVIES, 2004; MAUTHNER & HEY, 1999). When studying language in interaction (such

as in focus group interviews) it is both possible and beneficial to ascertain variations and contradictions in subject positioning, and the ambivalence resulting from different discourses (POTTER & WETHERELL, 1987). [12]

It is not only interesting to study the way in which people position themselves,—how they use and refer to different discourses—and the consequences of the positioning. For me, in accordance with FROSH, PHOENIX and PATTMAN (2003), it is also of interest to ask why a person positions her or himself in a certain way. That is, with regard to the subject matter of this article I find it relevant to ask (even though it is hard to make anything other than very tentative suggestions) why some individuals put such emphasis on the risk of relationship dissolution in relation to parenthood while others do not. There may be general patterns of argumentation in a focus group discussion, but by looking at individual narration and positioning, the investigation of something general may show something rather specific. [13]

In the focus group data the participants often reflect more or less explicitly over their positioning. The participants refer to different reasons for a certain standpoint, and in this way understand themselves, who they are, and why they take the position they do. I am influenced by narrative analysis (see e.g. RIESSMAN, 2001) in that I follow individual narration and subject positioning throughout the interview. In this way it is possible to detect whether a person is relatively consistent or wavering in their positioning. For example, some focus group participants continuously refer to the risk of relationship dissolution in the discussion about the timing of parenthood. Other individuals also refer to this risk but not as frequently and not with such emphasis and concern. Several of the participants who stress the risk of union dissolution bring up their own experiences of growing up in broken homes. In this way, the narrative, as FREEMAN (1993) argues, becomes a recollection of the past that is told in relation to the present and the future. A person portrays herself through narration, and uses the narrative to make sense of herself and her life as it is lived at the moment. In this way, narration and subject positioning are processes of understanding and rewriting the self. From my point of view, by studying the way in which different people understand and describe themselves, the understanding of people's actions may be improved. [14]

4. Having a Child Together? Parenthood Jeopardises the Relationship

4.1 The ideal life and family

One aspect of a good life as it is portrayed in the focus group discussions is to live with a partner in a loving reciprocal relationship. To find *the* partner, *the* forever-lasting love is in general emphasised as essential, particularly when the decision to try for a child is discussed. Following the participants' narration, looking at how they understand themselves and their actions, shows a recurring affirmative positioning of the nuclear family. Postponed parenthood and the timing of parenthood are described as being contingent on the intimate relationship. The right romantic partner has to be found, and time and cohabiting

make certain that he or she is *the* one. Duncan, a 36 year-old first time parent, puts it the following way:

Extract 1

Duncan: I had the view that life was going to look a certain way [when entering parenthood] but of greatest importance was trust in the relationship. […] I know that it is going to be the two of us until we die, that's my true conviction, but had I doubted that then it hadn't been anything—no child (Duncan, 36, first time parent, focus group 8). [15]

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

Extract 2

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

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

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

Cleo: They probably think that it is going to last. I really hope they do, that they don't start the relationship on the condition that it doesn't matter if it ends (Sarah 30, Jasmine 28, Cleo 28, focus group 1). [16]

There are many things said in this quotation that signify common ways of arguing and recurrent orientations of positioning. Sarah, for example, stresses how important it is for her to be sure that she will live the rest of her live with the man she is having a child with. Sarah, like Duncan, grew up with divorced parents. In the interview, she repeatedly mentions her strategy of how to prevent relationship dissolution, which is to extend the period of cohabiting before parenthood. But, as she also states and Jasmine confirms, there is no way to be absolutely sure that a relationship will last. The intimate relationship and a nuclear constellation are in this way utterly uncertain. [17]

The nuclear family is the dominating discourse when how to live life and what is best for the child are talked about in the focus groups. Some participants,

however, position themselves in alternative ways. Harry, a first time parent (31, focus group 2), is one of those. He expresses his view on the nuclear family with ambivalence. With regard to one of his statements, he anticipated entering parenthood at some stage in life but never imagined himself living *the* nuclear family. In other parts of the interview, however, he states that it was important to him to "test the relationship" before deciding it was time to try for a child. Harry's reasoning is one example of the predominant notion that a child is to be had in a relationship. It is also an indication that the nuclear family is not necessarily connected to positive attributes. Max is a participant who with determination confirms this. He is the only one who rejects the nuclear family as the ideal arrangement for raising a child in, and who presents an alternative, namely to have a child with a friend instead of a partner. But all the same, as the excerpt below shows, the nuclear family ideal is prominent also when Max talks.

Extract 3

Max: Well, in a way that's how you have been raised, how it should be [to have a nuclear family]. And it is probably really good for the children if the parents stay together forever because it is hard when they divorce. If they stay together all their lives and they are happy together. I think it is probably really tough if the parents stick together only because they have children. It is probably harder. Because for me it was hard when my parents got divorced but after a while I realised that it was much nicer when they were separated. I have a hard time believing that it [a relationship] will last. Everybody separates and if they don't they live in totally sick marriages [laughter]. There may be some, there are some few who appear to be fine [who have a good relationship] but many of them, my friends' parents who are still married have quite unpleasant marriages where one decides everything and one sort of always steps aside. Well, I believe the risk that you divorce is great. […] Well, you can try and I will try, obviously I will, but it feels like the statistics only indicate that it won't last. Why would my marriage in particular last? […] Well, I also thought, like I thought in the past that perhaps it would be better to have children with a friend. And both had their families. Because I don't think it is bad for the child to grow up in two different families, no I only think that is good, to get lots of different impressions but never any distressing arguments between mum and dad (Max 26, focus group 7). [18]

Max has little faith in the lasting potential of intimate relationships. This position makes it hard for him to stress that the best for the child is to grow up in a family consisting of both original parents. But Max is very aware of the prevalence of this discourse. His positioning indicates that the nuclear family discourse is so taken for granted that it is almost impossible to reject totally. Max refers to the nuclear family in the affirmative when he says: "… it is probably really good for the children if the parents stay together forever". It is, however, only good on the condition that the relationship is "healthy", "good" and characterised by equity, and there is little chance of any relationship to live up to these criteria in the long run, according to Max. Thus, relationships dissolve and should dissolve, since it is not in the best interest of the child or the parents to stay in a relationship that is not good. Max refers to his own experiences and legitimates his positioning and disbelief in the nuclear family by doing so. In the context of the interview and

mediated through his narration, Max, as FREEMAN (1993) would say, connects the past with the present and the future, in order to logically depict and understand himself. [19]

4.2 Risking separation

The notion of risking relationship dissolution when entering parenthood permeates the focus group discussions, and is connected to discourses of love, a good intimate relationship, family and a good childhood. The participants talk about separation as the natural solution, should any of the partners be dissatisfied with the relationship. They bring up experiences, observations and statistical data to show the occurrence of relationship dissolution, and they produce a picture of parenthood as particularly straining on intimate relationships. Postponed parenthood and the increased mean age of first time parents are often explained similar to how Amanda and Ella describe it:

> Extract 4
>
> Amanda: Then I also believe that with our generation which has experienced divorce that you like to wait with having children until you are quite sure.
>
> Ella: Ask me, I know. My parents are divorced.
>
> Amanda: Yes of course. That is the norm if anything.
>
> Ella: Yes. Yes, because I believe that matters, in my case. That you sort of, yes, wait. You should rather be 100 percent sure, even though obviously you can't be, but still, sort of. If you get my thinking.
>
> Amanda: Yes absolutely. You want to be quite sure anyway (Amanda 31 and Ella 33, focus group 3). [20]

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

> Extract 5
>
> Amanda: I want to know that Hubert and I can deal with conflicts [between us] in a good way that won't affect the child. And I want to sort of know that I know him. I don't want any personal traits to pop up that I don't know, recognise or can't handle when I sit with a little baby that screams. That wouldn't work. You want to get things sorted out first (Amanda 31, focus group 3). [21]

And later on she says:

> Extract 6
>
> Amanda: It is also a fear of how it is going to be. My new traits and his new traits that
> are the result of this [having a child]. Is it going to work? How do we make it work?
> Will we continue to have fun together or will it be a constant struggle with time and
> energy? And feelings of insufficiency, right. It will, it will change so much. There are
> so many who separate the first year. That is how it is. You know what you've got but
> not what you'll get (Amanda 31, focus group 3). [22]

Generally in the focus group data to live and to "experience life" as a couple over
an extensive period of time before parenthood is commonly referred to as *the*
strategy to prevent relationship dissolution. Amanda's accounts signify a
prominent dilemma in regard to this. She talks about wanting to know all her
partner's sides before entering parenthood to try to avoid unpredicted scenarios
(Extract 5), but in other parts of the interview she states that parenthood *will*
change life, her and her partner (Extract 6). The question is: How? Will the
relationship endure? In line with the positioning of other focus group participants
Amanda succinctly states: "You know what you've got but not what you'll get". [23]

Amanda and Sarah (Extract 2), two individuals in two different interviews,
explicitly relate the risk of separation to the risk of single motherhood. Like other
participants they connect single motherhood with hardship. To be a single
mother, as it is most commonly depicted, is to be constantly short of time, energy
and money. When Sarah and Amanda talk about how to avoid single parenthood,
they refer to the strategy of "getting to know the partner properly" before entering
parenthood. But there are others who act, as I see it, more pragmatically towards
uncertainty and the potential scenario of separation. Maya (26, first time parent,
focus group 2) is one example. According to her, to gain a good education and a
stable income has been a way to make certain that she would manage by herself
in case she became a single mother. I call Maya a pragmatic person because she
presents a somewhat practical solution to a potential problem. "Pragmatic"
participants in the focus group data tend to do this. They also tend to be less
worried about the outcomes of parenthood. Participants like Sarah and Amanda,
on the other hand, do not erase the risk of separation by their positioning. Their
strategy does not appear to decrease anxieties about the possible outcomes of
parenthood. [24]

4.3 Responsible parenthood

To have a child is portrayed as a great responsibility in the focus group data.
What is best for the child should always be of utmost importance. The nuclear
family model and dual earner dual carer parenthood saturate notions of what is
best for a child. The dominating discourse is that it is best for a child to grow up
with two physically and emotionally involved parents. Jonathan's positioning
throughout the interview exemplifies this. For Jonathan, the most essential aspect
of responsible parenthood is to give the child daily access to both mother and

father. He, as many other participants, refers to his own childhood to legitimate his standpoint.

Extract 7

Jonathan: My parents separated when I was four years old, right. Exactly when you need your father the most, and mum moved five hundred kilometres away, sort of. That is not good for the child, really. This is how it is: if you have a child then you're responsible for them. And I'm convinced, there is no-one who could persuade me to think differently, it is not politically correct but it is my opinion that a child needs a mother and a father. That is, a woman and a man to look up to, as role models to look up to and learn from. And therefore I don't believe in [raising] children in homosexual relationships. No I don't believe in that. I think things will go wrong. Like, it is possible, it is possible to solve in other ways, like with other role models besides the couple so to say. But it is more like, I think that if you have a child you shouldn't have it for your own sake. [You're] responsible for the child. Therefore my demands are very high before I have a child with anybody. Then it has to work (Jonathan 29, focus group 5). [25]

Later on in the interview Jonathan stresses his opinion again. He argues that careful reflection is required of any couple before they start trying for a child. Has the relationship a good chance of survival? Will it endure the strains of pregnancy and parenthood? Responsible parenthood requires attentive consideration of this point. Thus, as a parent or potential parent a person is responsible for the child's well being. Finding the right partner as a strategic endeavour to decrease the risk of separation is an integral part of this responsibility. [26]

There are participants who argue that parenthood results in increased responsibilities towards one another and the relationship. Brita (28, focus group 6) is the one who does so most explicitly. According to Brita, parents should try hard to make the relationship work if there are problems. This is regarded as best for the child. However, Brita (as well as the other focus group participants) is very much influenced by the discourse of love, that is, notions of what should characterise a good intimate relationship. Brita's quote below illustrates how the discourse of love and the discourse of "the best for the child" may become contradictory.

Extract 8

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

> relationship. I don't mean that you have to live together, but in some way I think that you can see it like this as well (Brita 28, focus group 6). [27]

A relationship is only worth sustaining if both partners regard it as being based on mutual love. At the same time, the best for the child is to grow up with both parents. These two discourses, the one about romantic love and the one about the nuclear family, are to some extent contradictory and may create dilemmas. Brita is one participant who emphasizes that the child itself is reason enough to endure a relationship, or at least to try harder than otherwise. This is not a common positioning within the discussions. The participants are more prone to stress that an unsatisfactory relationship is damaging for both child and parents and thus separation is the natural solution. Brita is the only one who is close to rejecting the discourse of love, but it is nothing more than a mere suggestion. Instead she alters her positioning in the affirmative. This becomes evident when narrative analysis, such as the one RIESSMAN (2001) proposes, is applied and Brita's narration throughout the interview is studied as a fruitful complement to the exploration of her positioning towards certain discourses. [28]

It is common for the focus group participants to express concerns about whether, and in that case how, parenthood will affect the relationship. There is no indication of notions that pregnancy, child-birth and possible strains of parenthood should lead to decreasing expectations and greater tolerance to change. In BERNHARDT and GOLDSCHEIDER's work (2006) some informants seemed more worried about negative consequences of parenthood than others. Those who did were less likely to have entered parenthood at the time of the second survey four years later. It is not possible for me to draw such conclusions from the focus group data. What it is possible to say is that deferment of parenthood was often understood in terms of not knowing what to expect and worrying about negative outcomes, for instance with regard to the intimate relationship. By exploring individual narration the following pattern emerged: Many of the focus group participants who persistently brought up risks with parenthood had grown up with divorced parents. Those participants were in general the ones who most decisively connected an auspicious childhood with a nuclear family arrangement and stressed that relationship dissolution had to be avoided. Not all, however, embrace the nuclear family discourse. Max (Extract 3) dismisses it. To him love is liquid, to use BAUMAN's (2003) term; there is no forever lasting love to be found; romantic love comes and goes. What is interesting here is that Max refutes the nuclear family but not romantic love. When love is no longer there it is to be found elsewhere. To Max, this is in the best interests of both the children and the parents. [29]

5. Concluding Discussion

Zygmunt BAUMAN says that "[h]aving children or not having them is arguably the most consequential and far-reaching decision there is, and so it is also the most nerve-straining and tension-generating decision one is likely to confront in the course of an entire life" (BAUMAN, 2003, p.43). This may not be the case for all people. For some the passage to parenthood may be a natural, easy choice to make. This article, however, suggests that for many individuals the decision to enter parenthood is related to tension and anxiety. Will I change? Will my partner change? Will the relationship change? What will happen if things change? A fear of change is prominent. It is a fear of making a decision without knowing the outcome. *Why* then is change such a threatening scenario when the transition to parenthood is discussed? [30]

The primacy of romantic love: My first suggestion to why change is dreaded is connected to the discourse of romantic love. Romantic love, that is to find forever lasting, pulsating, emotional and physical attraction in a partner, has in the secularised world, as BECK and BECK-GERNSHEIM (1995) argue, come to be the meaning of life. But what happens to the romantic relationship when a child is born? What happens when a new object of love, a new individual that demands attention and care, comes into the world? The focus group participants talk about possible strains that parenthood might have on the intimate relationship; they are aware of a risk that other studies state. That is, the transition to parenthood appears to have a negative effect on relationship satisfaction (SHAPIRO, GOTTMAN & CARRÉRE, 2000; WADSBY & SYDSJÖ, 2001). Romantic love and everyday family life are hard to realise jointly. This emerges in the analysis of the focus group data. Much of the discussions are centred on the family we live with (to use GILLIS' 1996 way of reasoning), that is, the everyday family life with constraints and conflicts, rather then on the mythical, romanticised family. This is very interesting. There is an awareness that everyday family life may not be conflict free and harmonized, but despite this the discourse of romantic love is not rejected or modified; it remains strong and does not waver. A love relationship is believed to be worth sustaining only on the premises outlined by GIDDENS (1992), and is in this respect "liquid" (BAUMAN, 2003). To me, this refusal of accepting change and rejecting the idea of romantic love indicates that BECK and BECK-GERNSHEIM (1995) are right in proposing romantic love as the new meaning of life, which clashes with, or rather is a reason for, as they put it, the everyday chaos of love. [31]

The conflicts of flexibility: The findings of this study confirm much of what is said within the sociological theory of individualization and modernization. The second aspect I would like to discuss is why change is talked about in such negative terms in the focus groups renders comprehension when related to this brand of theorising. Flexibility and mobility are highly valued characteristics and required of a person in societies where "institutionalised individualism" (BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 2002) permeates economic, political and social life. To have a life of one's own and to focus on individual self-fulfilment are promoted, perhaps particularly in societies like Sweden where family life is organised around the dual

earner (and dual carer) principle. The question for people living in those kind of national contexts is: How will parenthood affect work and leisure time? Or rather: How will parenthood *not* impose on life? Change is to a large extent dreaded. Family life and the child tie people down in some respects, and make it harder to be flexible and mobile with regard to work, and also socially. BECK and BECK-GERNSHEIM (1995) say that this is one big attraction with parenthood—it is a refuge from self-fulfilment and flexibility. However, it may also cause dilemmas due to different notions of how to be and how to live. Should one live a settled life and be a good parent or live a mobile, flexible life as a good worker. In addition, the notion of liquid love fosters both men and women to strive for financial, individual independence, to be able to manage by oneself and provide for the child if the intimate relationship ends in separation. In accordance with BAUMAN (2003, p.34) the focus group participants portray the "drive for freedom" and the "craving for belonging" as being hard to merge. Love and intimacy towards a partner is something highly desired among Swedish young adults, and so is parenthood. Many, however, live alone (ENGWALL, 2005). The focus group participants portray the nuclear family and having a child together with another person to be the ideal, but the discourse of love, that is to think first and foremost of oneself, curtails this ideal. [32]

"Non-modern" aspects of parenthood and intimacy: The findings of this study suggest that there is a distinction between the discourse of romantic love and the discourse of what is best for the child. It has been argued and shown in previous studies that modern family life is saturated by ambivalence and contradictions. Societal and social demands on individuality are in opposition to notions of family life (BECK & BECK-GERNSHEIM, 1995, 2002; BÄCK-WIKLUND & BERGSTEN, 1997). In addition, I would like to suggest that ideas of what should characterise a good intimate relationship (see GIDDENS, 1992) correspond to the notion of living one's own life and to first and foremost considering one's own needs and desires; the characteristic of contemporary Western world life that BECK and BECK-GERNSHEIM (2002) call institutionalised individualism. That is, if the intimate relationship is seen to restrain individual happiness and self-fulfilment, it might be better to move on. Notions of what is best for the child, on the other hand, relate to the nuclear family discourse and thoughts about "settling down". BÄCK-WIKLUND and BERGSTEN (1997, p.114, 192) call the child "non-modern", in that it is a hindrance to the individualistic aspirations of the parents. My suggestion is that the romantic intimate relationship is also non-modern in this respect, perhaps particularly in Sweden where family life is organised around the dual-earner, dual-carer principle. [33]

Individualisation through the Swedish welfare system: It is possible to live alone with dependant children in Sweden. The Swedish social welfare system is generous with, for instance, subsidised daycare, housing allowances, monthly child allowance and more. Family benefits enable the combination of single parenthood and paid work, and promote equal numbers of women and men in the paid labour force. It could be argued that Sweden with its welfare state has become one of the most individualistic countries in the world. It renders possibilities for men and women, mothers and fathers to manage on their own.

On the other hand this may induce difficulties in sustaining intimate relationships. Many participants in the focus group data refer to the social security net when talking about relationship dissolution with children involved. The welfare system makes them certain that they would manage financially as single parents. Other aspects appear more worrisome about separating as a parent, such as not being able to fulfil the idea of responsible parenthood and what is best for the child, the idea of romantic and forever lasting love, and the predominating discourse about nuclear family life. In individualised Sweden, the "craving for belonging" (BAUMAN, 2003, p.34) pervades. There are certainly outcomes of independence within the Swedish social welfare system that directly impact on people's desires, decisions, and ideals in life. These outcomes would be interesting to discuss and explore further in future studies. [34]

The expectations from intimate relationships have probably increased in the Western world and so have problems with making relationships last. LESTHAEGHE and MOORS (1996) stress that those tendencies are important to consider when studying family formation and transitions to parenthood. They suggest that expectations from intimate relationship are included when the Western world trend of postponed parenthood is studied. The findings of this article support this suggestion. In the focus groups the intimate relationship is prominently brought up as an important aspect when deciding if and when to try for a child. I propose that studies on family formation and reproductive behaviour include these aspects more often. [35]

Acknowledgements

Appendix: Focus Group Composition

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

Focus group 2 Town / countryside	Stella 32 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting.	Parent. On parental leave.
	Michael 28 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting with Stella.	Parent.
	Maya 26 years old.	Working. University college degree.	Cohabiting.	Parent.
	Caroline 29 years old.	Working. University college degree.	Cohabiting.	Parent. On parental leave.
	Harry 31 years old.	Working. High school degree.	Cohabiting with Caroline.	Parent.
	Angelina 32 years old.	Working. University college degree.	Cohabiting. Has been together for 6 years.	Parent. On parental leave.

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

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

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

	Jonathan 29 years old.	Studying at university college.	Single.	No child.
	Joel 26 years old.	Studying at university college.	Single.	No child.

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

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

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

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

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