

Brought to bring?

Perspectives of the childfree phenomena in Norway.

Master thesis

NICKLAS ISELVMO

SUPERVISOR

Arnhild Leer-Helgesen

University of Agder, 2023

Faculty of Social Sciences

Department of

Global Development and Planning

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Abstract

This thesis presents an exploration of how childfree individuals in Norway balance societal and personal factor in their decision, as well as identifying which societal factors are presented as most important for them. The study employs a phenomenological and hermeneutical approach to understand their experiences and uncover deeper societal contexts, through a mixed methodology. Through four semi-structured qualitative interviews with two males and two females between their late-twenties and mid-thirties it captures insight from childfree individual in a highly relevant age.

An online convenience sampled survey on Norwegian reproductive attitudes was sequentially utilized (N=291). Thereafter the data sets were thematically analysed qualitatively, and cross-tabulated and categorically analysed and triangulated with one another.

The findings reveal a complex range of motivations and experiences among childfree individuals, primarily rooted in autonomic and humanistic values, and a wide understanding for their choice. This study seeks to build a deeper understanding of the evolving societal attitudes towards childfree individuals, illuminating its implication for demographic and cultural shifts in contemporary Norway.

Acknowledgements

To my dearest Farah

And my steady parents

Blooming family

Fantastic and rare friends

Cheerful and helpful colleagues

Patient supervisor

And my old Spanish guitar

List of abbreviations and figures:

Abbreviations

CFR – Cohort Fertility Rate

HDI – Human Development Index

SDT – Self-Determination Theory

Sikt – Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research

SSB – Statistics Norway (Statistisk Sentralbyrå)

TFR – Total Fertility Rate

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Introduction

It dawned on me as I was turning 30, that barely anyone I knew had children, which is a major difference to our parental generation. In this age you are frequently asked not if, but *when* you are going to have children, to which someone deny that they want for various reasons. It was intriguing to untangle the threads and understand the reasons behind why someone simply does not want children. This would entail to lift the normative curtain and read.

By the calling of the former Prime Minister Solberg in 2019 Norwegians were presented the cold truth as seen from above: we need children in order for our nation to remain. In the meanwhile we are witnessing climate change and human suffering in real time, but lack recognition for a childfree choice. Veever called the voluntary childlessness (another terminology for being childfree) a *neglected area of family study* in 1973, which still ring true to some degree in Norway, yet is being addressed by inspiring scholars. It is important to understand reproductive attitudes, not just for policymaking, but to build understanding, recognition and investigate the depths of their choice for the sake of development.

In this thesis, the aim is to offer a nuanced exploration of the phenomenon of choosing to be childfree in Norway, a decision that appears increasingly prevalent in contemporary society. Our research delves into the complex interplay of personal and societal factors that influence this choice. We critically examine how individual aspirations, societal norms, and global concerns, such as environmental impact, shape the decision-making process.

Employing a mixed-method approach that combines phenomenological and hermeneutical analyses, our study aims to uncover the lived experiences and perceptions of individuals who opt for a childfree life. By doing so, we seek to contribute to a deeper understanding of this growing trend and its implications for societal shifts, guided by the questions below.

Research Questions:

How do Norwegian adults balance societal and personal factors in their decision to be without children?

Which societal factors are presented as important for the choice to be childfree?

These research questions will guide our investigation into the diverse motivations and experiences of childfree individuals in Norway, shedding light on the intersecting nature of their decisions.

Philosophy of science

Within social sciences, various perspectives have played a distinct role throughout my education. The composition of development studies is of a cross-disciplinary nature, which has granted valuable lenses to analyse phenomena through. The topic of this thesis revolves around researching the childfree phenomena, which delves into the experiences of those who, does not necessarily affiliate themselves with this word, yet can be defined as so when they make an explicit and intentional choice not to have children (Blackstone and Stewart, 2012: 720).

My choice of the phenomenological and hermeneutic approach stems from their applicability and epistemic tradition in the social sciences, as well as having a grand relevance to build understanding of the topic of this thesis.

Phenomenology is a philosophy that concerns itself with the question of how individuals make meaning of the world around them (Bryman, 2012: 30). Being childfree can be seen as a phenomenon that stems from certain experiences, which may or may not be of relation, and which I will empirically research through individual, semi-structured interviews. Hermeneutics central idea revolves around that the analyst of a text must aim to retrieve the meanings of a text from the authors' perspective, heeding the social and historical context of which the text was produced (Bryman, 2012: 560). This choice is interpreted with the backdrop of a steady trend throughout the 2010s, to a record low of children being born in Norway in 2023 (SSB, 2023). Norway as a country has a renowned, but not unproblematic welfare system for parents, in an era of heightened economic, geopolitical and environmental concern (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023). Hermeneutics can aid in understanding the decisions of those who choose to be childfree within this, and other contexts. Phenomenology complements this by examining the lived experiences of individuals choosing not to have children.

Phenomenology

This philosophical approach seeks to comprehend how individuals interpret and experience the world, and how these experiences shape their understanding of reality. This study adopts a phenomenological perspective to delve into the complex, subjective experiences of childfree individuals in Norway. Phenomenology emphasizes understanding the world through personal experiences (Bryman, 2012: 30). It is instrumental in exploring how childfree adults construct their realities, influenced by both environmental concerns and personal factors. The approach focusses on meaning-making: how individuals make meaning of the world around them, which can help to

uncover the lived experiences of research participants, as well as providing more knowledge of the social world. This approach not only uncovers the intentional acts behind choosing to be childfree but also how these decisions intertwine with societal norms and personal values. Emphasizing the concept of intentionality, this method allows us to comprehend the nuanced meanings and motivations behind being childfree. By applying phenomenology, this research also engages in self-reflection, enhancing its reflexivity and depth. This is crucial for understanding the layered complexities of the childfree decision, offering insights into how individual choices reflect broader societal and environmental dynamics.

Experiencing and living deliberately without reproducing

This thesis employs a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of individuals in Norway who deliberately choose not to have children. Cerbone's (2006: 15) perspective on phenomenology, focusing on the experience itself rather than the object of experience, guides this exploration. This method allows for an in-depth understanding of the emotions, thoughts, and existential meanings associated with the childfree decision. By combining qualitative interviews and quantitative survey data, the study gains both depth and breadth, offering insights into how individuals perceive and experience the phenomenon of being childfree. This mixed-method approach provides a comprehensive view of the various aspects of choosing a childfree life.

Hermeneutics

How can we derive meaning from our experiences and share them with others? In exploring the childfree decision, the hermeneutic approach is pivotal. It distinguishes between the objective analysis of natural sciences and the interpretive nature of social sciences. As Gadamer suggests, understanding individual actions requires a comprehension of the person's self-perception and their historical context. This study applies hermeneutics to interpret the narratives of individuals choosing to be childfree, considering their historical, cultural, and personal contexts. It recognizes that these decisions are not made in isolation but are deeply influenced by the individual's history and societal norms. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of the childfree choice as a complex interplay of personal experiences and societal influences.

This section explores the role of hermeneutics and phenomenology in interpreting the childfree experience, underscoring the importance of context and personal narrative in understanding this choice.

Contextualizing the choice

Hermeneutics, a theory that stresses the importance of interpretation in shaping human experiences, offers a valuable lens for examining the childfree phenomenon. This approach recognizes the influence of personal history, values, and worldviews in shaping decisions. As Theodore (2021) notes, hermeneutics seeks not to establish methods or norms but to acknowledge the limitations and contexts that frame our experiences. The philosophical tradition encompasses the interpretation of texts, speech and symbolic expressions, and is applicable to various humanistic and social science disciplines (Bryman, 2012: 560-561).

In the realm of being childfree, a hermeneutical perspective allows us to understand this choice as a meaningful and contextually grounded experience. The research and literature on being childfree, when viewed through this lens, reveal how individuals comprehend and integrate their decision into their broader sense of self and identity. The layered nature of choosing to be childfree makes the hermeneutic approach particularly applicable for this study. It enables a deeper insight into the subjective experiences of individuals, highlighting how this decision aligns with their life narratives and identity formation.

Integrating Hermeneutics and Phenomenology

The integration of hermeneutics and phenomenology can help us in understanding how individuals consider decisions about having children (hereafter termed *reproduction*), and how they are influenced by their historical, cultural, and social contexts. Together, these frameworks will be applied to the data from interviews and surveys to illuminate the intricate relationship between personal narratives, societal influences, and the existential aspects of the childfree choice. This approach aims to provide layered perspectives on the personal and contextual dynamics influencing the decision to live without children.

Theoretical framework

Having explored the hermeneutic and phenomenological aspects of the childfree experience, which emphasize context, interpretation, and the intrinsic nature of this lifestyle choice, we now transition to another vital theoretical framework: Self-Determination Theory (SDT). This theory, focusing on the motivational aspects of human behaviour, provides a complementary perspective by examining the underlying drives that keep individuals ticking towards or away from certain life choices, such as the decision to remain childfree.

Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory takes notice of the importance of intrinsic motivation, autonomy, and competence in driving behaviour. A preposition of the theory is that when people are intrinsically motivated, they achieve their best (Ryan & Deci, 2017: . The scale ranges from entirely intrinsic to entirely extrinsic in terms of motivation, where the former is self-determined and motivated from personal values or interests and the latter. Motivation can be said to be intrinsic if actions are motivated by interest, enjoyment, or inherent satisfaction of the activity itself (Stern, 2018). Intrinsic motivation can foster a greater satisfaction, interest, and confidence, which in turn can translate to heightened self-esteem, vitality, and well-being.

Extrinsic motivation on the other half, is driven by external coercion, incentives, accountabilities, or pressures. If people are acting to attain some separable outcome, they can be said to be extrinsically motivated. This type of motivation can however have a wide range, from passive compliance, based on external rewards, punishment, or deadlines, to active personal commitment. If the latter is to be achieved, extrinsic motivators ought to be internalized in a degree that lets them relate to their own values, interests, and sense of self.

Apart from motivations, and central to the theory is the notion that individuals have three basic psychological needs: *autonomy, competence, and relatedness* (Ryan and Deci, 2017, Stern, 2018). These needs are argued to strongly influence the intrinsic motivation of an individual (Ryan and Deci, 2017). *Relatedness* goes into the need for close, affectionate relationships with others. This could be by terms of finding unity through identification, interests or camaraderie. In turn, this could translate to eventual relations built by the childfree, mapping the understanding and support of others' behaviours. It could also bring into account their sense of relatedness to societal and

cultural norms, values and expectations. *Competence* entails the ability of tackling challenges and can be further heightened under conditions such as having freedom from demeaning evaluations and by receiving constructive as well as positive feedback. In terms of the thesis, it can be the childfree respondents' effectiveness and feeling of competence in "dealing" with the environment. *Autonomy* translates to the need for people to control their own lives. Choices, opportunities for self-direction and acknowledgement of feelings bolster feelings of autonomy. The possibilities of family planning heavily affects the level of autonomy in a reproductive context.

If an action or activity offer none of the qualities of relatedness, competence or autonomy for an individual, it is highly unlikely that intrinsic motivation is fostered regardless of the social environment (Stern, 2018). If these qualities are to enhance the integration of extrinsic motivations, there must be a pre-existing behaviour that is both self-determined and of a personal interest. A good example would be recycling, as individuals are not measured or fined if they refrain from doing it, but can be argued to do it by the conscious importance of the chore.

In the context of childfree adults, self-determination theory could be useful in understanding how their reproductive choices align with their personal values, goals, and motivations. It could also provide a framework for understanding how childfree adults navigate social pressures and expectations around parenthood, and how they assert their autonomy and maintain a sense of competence in their decision-making process (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 14). This theory is intended to examine to what degree individuals feel autonomous and empowered in their childbearing decisions, and how external factors such as societal expectations, cultural norms, and economic conditions may impact this autonomy. The theory can also help explore the role of personal goals and values in shaping childbearing decisions, and how individuals reconcile these goals and values with the costs and benefits of reproduction.

Connection of theory and research questions

Self-determination theory argues that individuals are more likely to engage in behaviours that align with their interests and goals, bound in their freedom (Ryan and Deci, 2017). In this context, childfree adults who feel autonomous in their childbearing decisions may be more likely to make decisions that align with their values and beliefs. The theory can help understand the level of autonomy individuals feel in their childbearing decisions, and further understand what shapes childfree adults' attitudes towards reproductive choices in Norway.

Capabilities Approach and Human Development

To keep the thesis under the developmental lens, the page is turned towards the capabilities approach, devised by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000). Their theory posits that capabilities are defined as genuine freedoms people have to achieve certain actions (doings) and states of being (beings). Capabilities are not just freedoms in theory nor the skills of an individual, but practical, real opportunities to do things that people wish to do and value (Sen, 2000: 18). The objective of development is hereafter to widen the spectrum of capabilities of each individual. Despite SDT positions itself on the premises of autonomy, the individual cannot succeed and bloom alone, but relies on family, a locality or the larger society, which is where relatedness enters the picture. No man is an island: the family normally provides life support from our conception, but no family can function independently outside of their society's scope. These relations can however provide good or bad conditions for the individual, which signifies the importance of directing the lens towards these conditions and identify which social institutions that improve what Stewart (2013: 1) calls 'human flourishing'. The idea of human development searches for what amplifies and motivates the individual to excel and flourish, and in turn contribute to its' societal frame.

The capabilities approach emphasizes that individual choices are deeply embedded in social contexts. Sen's notion of 'development as freedom' underlines the importance of providing individuals with the social opportunities to make choices that they value (1999: 39). In Nussbaum's (2000: 78-80) approach, freedom is understood as the ability to achieve a set of basic capabilities, such as bodily health, integrity, and the capacity for emotion, practical reason, and affiliation, which in this case could include the choice to be childfree. This choice, while personal, can be affected by a range of factors including environmental awareness, cultural norms, economic outlooks, perceived uncertainty and policy frameworks (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023, Savelieva et al., 2023, Sobotka et al., 2011, Nakkerud, 2021). We will return to these factors in due time. It is essential to examine how Norwegian societal structures support or hinder individuals in making decisions that align with their values and contribute to their sense of well-being.

Moreover, the approach highlights the interdependence between the individual and society. While SDT emphasizes autonomy, it also acknowledges the role of relatedness and community in personal growth (Ryan and Deci, 2017). The decision to remain without children is not made in isolation, but is influenced by the quality of social institutions and the broader cultural context. Understanding

how these societal factors facilitate or impede personal choices is crucial. In the Norwegian context, it is crucial to explore the societal institutions and cultural narratives that shape attitudes towards childlessness. Following North's (1990: 3) broad definition of institutions as "humanly devised constraints that structure political, economic and social interactions," social institutions include norms and rules of behaviour. They thus encompass both organizations and norms, which in each case may be formal or informal. Social norms influence behaviour and are consequently important in determining the human development impact of goods and services intended to promote human development, whether provided by the state, the market or social organizations (North, 1999: 4). Social competencies are defined here as what such institutions can be and do—i.e., they are in a sense the capabilities of institutions, as against those of groups. The term 'social capabilities' is deliberately disregarded in capabilities literature, leaving capabilities to refer to valuable things that individuals can be or do, and which they have reason to value (North, 1990: 3).

In the context of Norwegian adults' decisions about childlessness, this approach allows us to explore how individuals navigate their personal aspirations against a backdrop of environmental concerns and societal norms. The Human Development Index (HDI), which is a summary of the United Nations (UN) three key dimensions of human development: the life expectancy index, education index and Gross National Income (GNI - dollars per capita), sees Norway second only to Switzerland (UNDP, 2021). The case of researching development in Norway therefore presents a unique setting where individuals generally have access to a wide range of capabilities. Yet, the decision to remain without children often involves weighing the value of personal freedom and life satisfaction against concerns about environmental sustainability and societal expectations (Nakkerud, 2021: 7-8). Being childfree can in turn foster stigmatization from others and potentially bring external pressure that impairs development and freedom (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016: 394).

Theoretical Foundations for Childfree Decisions

Layered understanding of the phenomena

This chapter explores the social fields – networks of relationships, cultural norms, and institutional influences – that impact personal decisions about childlessness. The chapter emphasizes the role of societal expectations and individual perspectives, discussing how these factors interact and shape

the choice to be childfree. It provides a foundational understanding of the various ideological dilemmas that individuals face in the context of reproduction, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of this complex social phenomenon.

We however begin by categorizing key terms to categorize individuals without children, crucial for understanding the childfree phenomenon in Norway. We differentiate between the childless (those desiring, but unable to have children), the childfree (making an explicit and intentional choice not to have children) as earlier defined by Blackstone and Stewart (2012: 720), and the environmentally childfree (opting against children due to climate concerns) (Nakkerud, 2021). Additionally, we adopt Veivers' (1980: 157) terminology, distinguishing 'delayers' (open to parenthood under different circumstances) and 'deniers' (firmly against having children regardless of their situation).

Reflecting on historical demographics, it's notable that childlessness was common in 19th and 20th century Europe, with over 20% of women remaining childless, as Kreyenfeld & Konietzka (2017: 5) note. Factors like high marital age due to employment patterns contributed to this trend. In the US and Australia, childlessness rates were significant as well, influenced by economic and wartime factors (ibid: 7). In the post-war era, family dynamics shifted dramatically. This period, characterized by a surge in fertility rates among those born in the 1930s and 40s, is termed by Veivers (1973: 203) as a "paradoxical decline of rates of childlessness." This era saw a rise in traditional family values, contrasting earlier trends. The 1970s marked the introduction of the 'childfree' term, signifying a movement away from viewing motherhood as a woman's sole identity. Researchers like Bloom & Pebley (1982) expanded the term 'voluntary childlessness,' reflecting the growing discourse around women's autonomy and rejection of motherhood as the sole feminine identity, continued by researchers such as Gillespie (2003) and Harrington (2019).

These changing perspectives paved the way for a more nuanced understanding of childlessness, where personal autonomy, relationships, finances, and environmental concerns, as highlighted by Majumdar (2004: 110) and Nakkerud (2021), became factors to pay attention to. Kreyenfeld & Konietzka (2017) further expand on the diversity of motivations behind this choice, yet emphasizing personal fulfilment beyond parenthood, which we will return to. However, reproductive values and identities are susceptible to transformation by life events and societal shifts

(Nakkerud, 2021: 207). This is exemplified by recent global phenomena, such as the recent Covid-19 pandemic, the environmental crisis and (the perception of) economic instability in the wake of the recession in 2008 (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023), which have distinctly influenced reproductive behaviours and intentions, as seen in Norway and beyond. One response to this is choosing to be childfree, but on an environmental foundation.

The concept of being environmentally childfree is centred on the decision to postpone or, limit childbearing to one (less) child, primarily due to environmental concerns (Wynes and Nicholas, 2017). This decision might be driven by worries about the potential offspring's future in an ecologically strained world, the environmental impact of childbearing in terms of consumption or carbon footprint (Wynes and Nicholas, 2017), or as a form of (environmental) protest (Kristensen, 2020: 162).

In exploring the decision-making process of Norwegian adults regarding childlessness, it is essential to consider various ideological perspectives that influence personal and societal views and discussions on this issue. Reproductive reasoning can be divided into a spectre of ideological roots which can be argued from both sides as a dilemma. These ideological dilemmas, devised by Nakkerud (2021: 8-13), in a limited version encompasses the notion of *liberalism*, which emphasizes individual freedom to do as one wishes, *biologism*, weighing biological instinct against the ecological impact of having children, and *globalism*, which contrasts low fertility rates in Western countries with their high per capita emissions.

Additionally *humanism* revolves around the balancing the desire to prevent children from growing up in dystopic conditions, against the hope of children finding solutions to future scenarios. Finally *sustainable development* revolves around economic, ecological, and social sustainability issues, such as the environmental crisis, against concerns like declining taxpayer numbers, an aging population and caregiver shortages. The latter is often identified in national conversations (Kristensen, 2020 : 162). These perspectives offer varied and nuanced viewpoints, providing a structured framework for analysing and viewing how individuals approach the decision to remain childfree, as well as how they themselves may meet resistance and counter arguments within various social institutions. It is also important to note that feminism could be an ideological dilemma, as women have another gender identity that fosters the expectation of evolving from womanhood to motherhood (Harrison, 2019: 23) and a more limited reproductive span in life.

Although gender differences will be qualitatively addressed, the thesis is limited to the childfree seen as a larger picture.

This study, while centred on childfree decisions in Norway, adopts an international perspective for contextualization. It examines how global issues like climate change and economic instability, highlighted in literature, resonate within the Norwegian context. This approach allows for a nuanced understanding of how worldwide events and perceptions of uncertainty, as discussed by Savelieva et al. (2023) and Hickman et al. (2021), influence the personal choices of Norwegians regarding childlessness. The thesis aims to integrate these global insights with local factors, and offer a thorough view of the childfree phenomenon in Norway.

Change of perspective and calls from above

While standing on the shoulders of giants within the field, this section aims to encompass the societal and demographic landscape that frames the decision to remain childfree. This section marks a shift from the individual motives to an examination of childlessness and the childfree choice against a more extensive, societal frame. This part of the chapter aim to merge the individual motivations of those opting for a childfree life with the broader demographic trends and societal shifts, by weaving together personal narratives into a larger cloth of demographic patterns and societal implications. Demography will be able to tell us about the contextual frame for being childfree, as well as show reproductive patterns, building a baseline for understanding societal undertones and norms. However, we will let a quote from the former government lead us on. Four years ago, the former Prime Minister of Norway, acknowledged the societal importance of fertility in the annual new-year's speech on the 1st of January 2019, and said the following:

“[...] relatively speaking, there will be fewer young people to bear the increasingly heavy burden of the welfare state. Norway needs more children! I don't think I need to tell anyone how this is done. And I'm not thinking of issuing any orders! Not everyone is able to have children, and not everyone wants to have children. For various reasons. And more people are waiting longer to start a family. Again, for various reasons. But if you wait too long, it becomes more difficult.” (Solberg, 2019).

This statement by the former Prime Minister underscores the concern over declining fertility rates and aligns with ongoing discussions about the complexities of family planning, societal norms, and

the impacts of delaying childbearing and ‘starting a family’ on both individuals and the welfare state.

Shifting reproductive attitudes in Norway

Contextualizing the demographic trends specific to Norway is vital to the thesis as it provides a foundation and understanding of the societal backdrop against which individuals are making childfree choices. Economic stability, education levels, family planning resources and cultural norms around family and childbearing can all play a role on reproductive attitudes and behaviour (Kohler et al., 2004: 655-659).

In this segment, demography is utilized to illuminate Norway's childfree trends. While acknowledging broader European patterns, the emphasis is on how demographic factors like fertility and Total Fertility Rate (TFR) play out in Norway. Key to this discussion is the recent rise in childlessness among Norwegian women, particularly highlighted by the 1992 fertility cohort, which reflects a growing trend of delayed motherhood and possibly increasing childfree choices. This Norwegian-specific demographic analysis ties directly back to our thesis question: *how does Norwegian balance personal and societal factors into their decision to be childfree?* By focusing on contemporary Norwegian trends, the discussion stays closely aligned with the study's primary objective of exploring the childfree phenomenon within the unique Norwegian socio-cultural and economic context.

A demography's future is shaped by fertility rates and the complex factors influencing them. The ideal Total Fertility Rate (TFR) for population stability is 2.1 children born per woman, accounting for parent replacement and mortality (Jones, 2022: 3490). However, Europe, particularly German-speaking countries (Kreyenfeld and Konietzka, 2017: 3), sees a trend of increasing childlessness, with some regions experiencing a 'lowest-low' TFR of 1.3, indicating significant and sustained population declines, and the halving of a stable population size in 45 years (Kohler et al., 2004: 642). Norway's TFR, which fell from 1.98 in 2009 to 1.41 in 2022, reflects this trend, marking the lowest rate recorded in the country (SSB, 2023). This change highlights a shift in reproductive behaviours and attitudes towards childbearing.

The concept of cohort fertility, or completed fertility rate (CFR), offers a more accurate measure of a country's fertility rates over time by tracking groups of individuals born in the same period. This approach, which provides insights into childbearing trends, reveal a significant rise in childlessness among Norwegian women by age 30, as observed in the 1992 fertility cohort, where 53,8 percent had not given birth. This data, showcased in Statistics Norway's (SSB) 2023 graph below, highlights the trend towards delayed motherhood in Norway, aligning with broader demographic shifts in developed countries, and illustrates the gradual change in Norway's reproductive behaviour. SSB (2022) identifies an increasing average age for first-time mothers as a primary factor in Norway's declining fertility rates, and heightened level of childlessness.

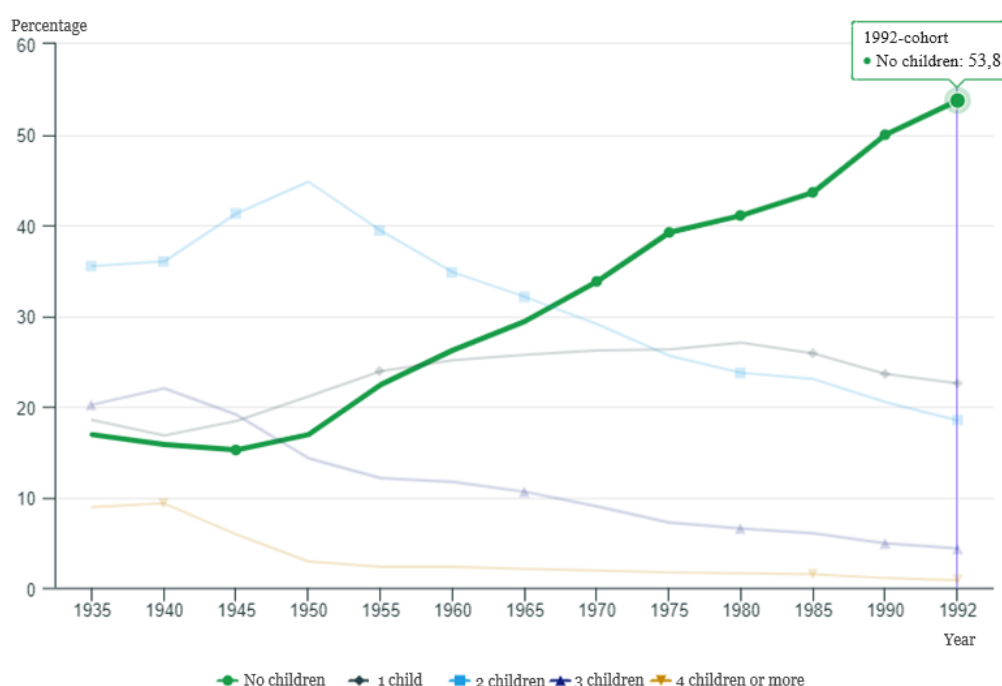


Figure 1 – Fertility cohorts in Norway – SSB, 2023 – Own translation

In Norway, family planning and fertility are influenced by social, economic, educational factors, and evolving gender roles (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023, Cools and Strøm, 2020). Parental leave policies and the impact of women's education on reproductive choices are also significant, with higher education often leading to postponed marriage and family life, and ties back to the concept of opportunity cost: the higher a woman's income and educational attainment, the more significant the perceived cost of motherhood becomes. This fertility trend, linked to the opportunity cost (Sobotka, 2017: 39), is observed across many developed countries, as well as Scandinavia and Finland, as seen below.

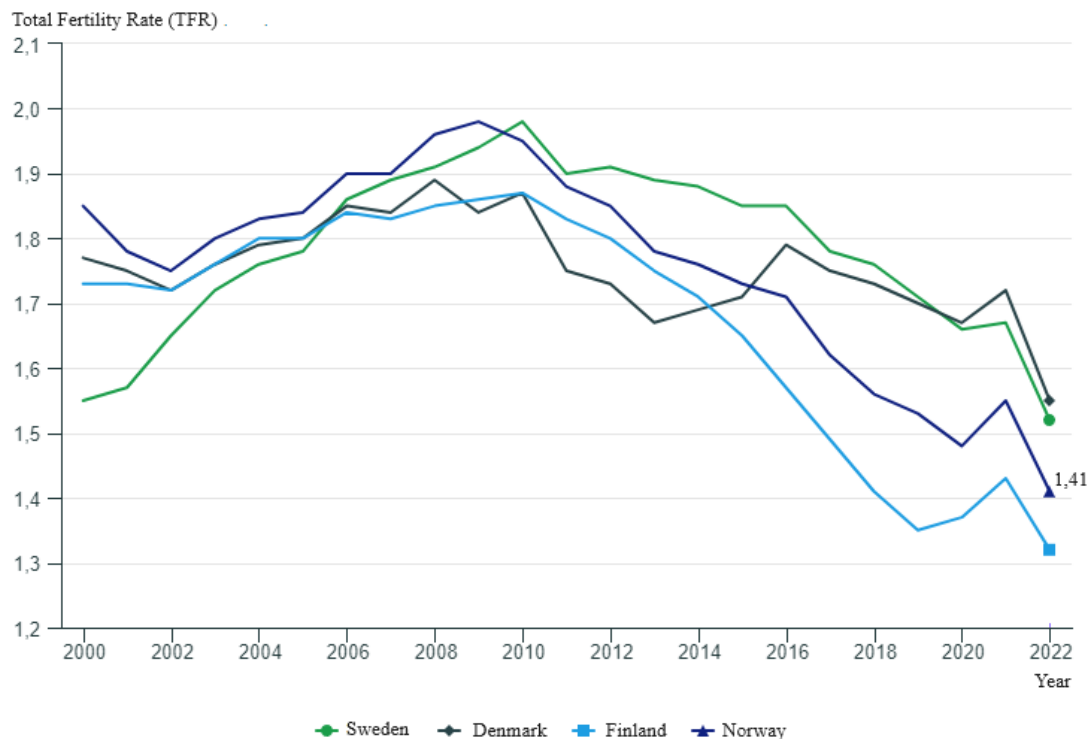


Figure 2 – Scandinavian and Finnish fertility – SSB, 2023 – Own translation

While Norway's fertility trends share similarities with its neighbouring countries and are influenced by an interplay of social, economic, and educational factors, it's important to recognize that reproductive choices are not solely determined by these external factors. Societal norms play an important role in shaping the circumstances which individuals navigate their reproductive decisions within. In the following sections, we will look into the intricate relationship between these collective expectations and individual autonomy, shedding light on the diverse motivations and convictions that underlie the choice to be childfree.

Norms and intentions

Societal norms, steeped in historical, cultural, and socio-economic contexts not only reflect collective expectations but also contribute significantly to the shaping of individual autonomy in reproductive decision-making (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023). Understanding individual intentions is a crucial lens through which we can gain insight into the complex tapestry of personal motivations, beliefs, and convictions that underlie the decision to lead a childfree life. These

intentions are not isolated; they are intersected between various factors, ranging from personal aspirations, experiences of stigmatization, and lifestyle choices to broader concerns about environmental sustainability and the overall well-being of society. Further in this study, these many aspects that play a role in shaping reproductive choices will be illuminated.

While Norway has a renowned welfare system, it is important to acknowledge that the state of the economy and the broader family policy environment are not the sole influencers of fertility intentions. Norms and perceptions held by young couples regarding family formation are of paramount importance, alongside considerations of economic security. Researchers have observed a growing trend indicative of a 'subjective turn' in fertility intentions in Norway (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023). In a country where most births are intentional, it's noteworthy that couples today are inclined toward having fewer children and employ a different cost-benefit calculation than in previous generations (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023). Traditional reproductive research has historically focused on assessing the advantages and disadvantages, often translated into health aspects and financial costs, that individuals weigh when making reproductive decisions (Cools and Strøm, 2020).

Childlessness in general in Norway varies by socio-economic status, with higher rates observed among men from lower socio-economic backgrounds, as well as among educated men in the capital Oslo, which challenges stereotypes (Grasdal and Lommerud, 2019: 271). Notably, women in Norway are less likely to be childless, partly due to some men fathering children with multiple partners. This complexity in reproductive choices is further influenced by factors such as the availability of contraception and shifting societal norms (Grasdal and Lommerud, 2019: 277). The topic of domestic fertility and national conversations surrounding changing reproductive attitudes, remains a subject of media and political discourse in Norway, emphasizing its societal significance (Kristensen, 2020: 156-157).

Research indicates a significant gap between expected and actual birth rates in Norway (Cools & Strøm, 2020). This disharmony could be linked to Norwegian adults often choosing to 'wait for the right time' to become parents or find the right partner, although other factors may also play a role. It's noteworthy that the reasons for delaying childbearing remain generally understudied in the Nordics (Savelieva et al., 2023: 254).

While the prevailing social norm in Norway suggests that having children at some point is expected, Cools and Strøm (2020: 46) conducted a survey to explore whether respondents experienced societal pressure to have a(nother) child, and the results revealed a gendered aspect. Approximately 12% of men and 24% of women reported experiencing societal pressure to have another child. This finding highlights the gendered nature of reproductive expectations, with extrinsic pressure exerted on women to a greater extent. Additionally, perceived and experienced health-related issues related to childbirth and childcare were identified (Hayford et al., 2016).

Reproductive choices are deeply personal, yet individuals often find themselves justifying these choices to various social institutions, including family, partners, peers, and the broader society. When one's decision deviates from widely shared cultural norms and expectations, it can lead to opposition in various forms. People who break the social role expectations on “*widely shared cultural stereotypes*” might actually be prone to social and economic sanctions (Ashburn-Nardo, 2016: 395). This might include a childfree woman being disregarded at an interview due to the employers’ assuming that a childless woman is due to have her maternal leave at some point.

Stigmatisation

Negative social evaluations of the childfree, has by researchers been coupled with the normative expectation of parenthood, or pronatalism (Moore and Geist-Martin, 2013: 233-235). Pronatalism build on the assumption that having children is natural and fundamental to human biology and instincts, that becoming a parent is a milestone of gender development, and that parenting is essential for a happy and meaningful life (Morison and Macleod, 2015: 185). The prominent discourse in favour of pronatalism is identified by Moore and Geist-Martin (2013: 236) to be that which sets question marks about a person’s fulfilment without children, which can colour perceptions about the childfree. This might be what childfree individuals might have to learn to parry.

Online childfree communities, such as the 1.5 million strong ‘/r/childfree’ forum on the popular platform Reddit, serve as safe spaces for those identifying as childfree to share experiences, find solidarity, and formulate strategies against stigmatization and invalidating discourse (Morison et al, 2016). In these communities, members can discuss the challenges they face, including the risk of infantilization, which invalidates their childfree choice due to a perceived lack of age and experience, and the further undermining of their reproductive choices (Nakkerud, 2021: 205).

Ashburn-Nardo (2016: 27) has found that discrimination in the US against childless adults has not decreased, despite the childfree phenomenon growing more prominent in recent years. While discrimination against childless adults remains a concern in contexts like the U.S., the situation in Norway is less clear due to a lack of specific research. This uncertainty highlights a gap in understanding the social acceptance of childfree individuals in Norway, especially in the context of changing fertility patterns and societal attitudes.

Reinterpretation of reproductive ideals

Understanding the decision to become or remain childfree involves examining various factors, as well as societal perceptions and support for this choice. Fertility rates provide important context in this regard: high fertility rates often suggest that childbearing is a cultural norm or expectation. On the other side of the coin, low fertility rates might indicate a societal shift towards prioritizing education, career, or personal fulfilment (Kohler et al., 2004: 655). The low TFR of 1,41 in Norway indicates life goals other than family and children, which has gained traction in recent years (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023). In regions with high cultural pressure to have children, individuals who choose childlessness may face stigmatisation and criticism from family, friends, or their community. Societies with low fertility rates may exhibit greater acceptance of the childfree choice.

Exploring the childfree trend in the Nordic region, particularly in Finland, reveals a growing acceptance of a childfree ideal (Rotkirch, 2020: 53) This trend, mirrored in the United States, signifies a shift in life priorities among young adults from traditional family roles to self-realization and career advancement (Jones, 2022; Adema and Fluchtmann, 2023, Rotkirch, 2020). In Norway, respondents between the ages of 25-44 state that the most important reasons for not having a(nother) child, was due to the difficulty of responsibility, strenuous delivery and pregnancy, and the limitations upon one's freedom (Dommermuth and Lappegård, 2021).

This raises questions about the traditional concept of a family. The norm in Norway is to have children, echoed in reproductive research which often assumes an eventual decision to have children (Kristensen, 2020: 158). In the context of this thesis, reproductive perceptions will be further examined amidst the lowest fertility rate measured in Norway.

The reasons for choosing a childfree lifestyle are many and varied, and while this thesis cannot cover all reasons comprehensively, it will explore broader themes and provide a diverse perspective

in the following pages. The next section will focus on reports related to economic and environmental concerns, as well as the identity of individuals who identify as childfree.

Concerns

Various factors, including economic concerns, fear of global instability, climate change, and environmental issues, are significantly shaping the attitudes of Norwegian youth towards childbearing. A recent survey conducted by the NHO (2023: 9) sheds light on these concerns among young Norwegians, with a substantial majority of 70% expressing economic anxieties. This resonates with news articles on the financial challenges associated with raising children, as reported by Volla (2022).

According to Sobotka et al. (2011) and Fluchtmann and Gustafsson (2023), this economic factor can deter individuals who are uncertain about parenthood, and it intersects with other reasons that discourage reproduction. This can be observed in the declining birth rates in Norway following the peak of 2009, which coincided with the global financial crisis of 2008 (as seen in Figure 2). Despite the domestic economy's relative resilience and quick recovery, with improvements in employment, wages, and GDP, Norwegian (and Nordic) fertility rates began to decline from that point onwards (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023). A general uncertainty that affects the willingness to have children persists, which could be further fuelled by frequent social media usage (Savelieva et al., 2023).

Economic fluctuations have historically played a profound role in shaping fertility rates. Notably, the 2008 financial crisis serves as a prime example of how economic challenges characterized by income losses, job insecurity, and dashed aspirations can erode individuals' confidence in embarking on parenthood (Sobotka et al., 2011). While data from both SSB (2023) trace these birth rate trends across Scandinavia, Finland (in Figure 2) it's essential to acknowledge that the relationship between economic recessions and fertility is not universally consistent. Each instance should be evaluated within its specific context.

On a global scale, research by Hickman et al. (2021) reveals that climate anxiety is increasingly influencing the daily lives and future decisions, including reproductive choices, of young people around the world. More than 45% of respondents reported that their concerns about climate change have negatively affected their daily functioning (Hickman et al., 2021: 866). This insight provides a

broader perspective on how environmental worries may impact the reproductive decisions of young Norwegians who are actively considering whether to start a family in the coming years.

Environmentally childfree

The 'Environmentally Childfree' category has emerged as a significant focus in recent studies and as a subset of the childfree, yet has grown rich in literature in recent years. This group prioritizes the environmental impact of human reproduction, with some individuals forgoing children as a potent personal contribution to reducing emissions. Research by Wynes and Nicholas (2017) supports this notion, quantifying the environmental benefits of not having children. My interest in this area was piqued by Eirik Nakkerud's work, who successfully engaged a substantial number of respondents in Norway identifying as environmentally childfree, under initial skepticism related to sampling issues in terms of numbers.

Wynes & Nicholas's study is pivotal, contrasting the carbon footprint of childbearing with other eco-friendly actions, such as living car-free or adopting a plant-based diet. Their research, which uses diverse sources like peer-reviewed literature and government reports, reveals the significant and controversial insight related to potential reduction of CO² by choosing not to have a(nother) child. Towering at 58.6-ton annual CO² emission (tCO²e) on average per human of ten sampled Western countries, it puts into perspective the next most high-impact mitigation action as living car-free at 2.4 tCO²e (Wynes and Nicholas, 2017: 4). However, this aspect of environmental action often lacks acknowledgment in educational and governmental discourse, as indicated by Canadian textbooks and various governmental guides. This puts at odds the sustainable development and globalism dilemma, which could be a reason why Norwegians choose to be childfree.

In Norway, this disconnect is mirrored in public discourse, where fertility discussions rarely link to environmental concerns. Public conversations on fertility in Norway analysed by (Kristensen, 2020: 156-158) illuminated that there were a national welfare state crisis, as well as a global climate crisis. Yet, it does not “seem conventional to connect the question of reproduction to the environmental crisis” (Nakkerud, 2021: 2). This gap highlights a crucial area of further exploration: the societal reluctance to consider reduced reproduction as a climate action. However, this thesis does not seek to point fingers at those who choose parenthood but aims to understand the motivations and implications of the childfree choice.

As we transition from exploring the childfree phenomenon and its impact on demographic trends, discourse, norms and intentions, we have examined various perspectives on reproductive choices. This has included delving into self-realization, environmental considerations, and the evolving reproductive attitudes. Now, as we move to the methodology chapter, these theoretical foundations will inform our empirical investigation, providing a comprehensive understanding of the complexities surrounding the choice to be childfree.

Methodology

In this chapter, the research design, data collection techniques, and analytical methods employed for this study will be presented. These components are selected to align with the research objectives and question, to ensure a thorough and nuanced search of why and how individuals choose to live their lives childfree, as well as the perception of this choice. Through this methodological framework, this thesis endeavours to contribute to meaningful and empirically grounded insights into the discourse on being childfree.

Let us return to the research question that this thesis aims to address: *How do Norwegian adults balance societal and personal factors in their decision to be without children?*

Additionally as a sub-question: *Which societal factors are presented as important for the choice to be childfree?*

Research design

Employed for this thesis, a mixed-methods approach was chosen. The first method includes semi-structured, qualitative interviews with a set of participants who are childfree. Additionally, there is a semi-structured interview with the much-referred scholar of the theoretical foundation, Eirik Nakkerud, who will represent an analytical voice in the discussion of this thesis.

The second method was a self-completion, online survey that aimed to map reproductive attitudes of Norwegian adults. In the following section, the contemplations behind the choices made in terms of research methods will be underlined. The outline will be taken from Bryman (2012) *Social Research Methods* and Brinkmann and Kvale (2015) *Interview – Det kvalitative forskningsinterview som håndværk (The qualitative research interview as a tool)*.

Qualitative aspects

The nature of this thesis revolves around the phenomenon of being childfree, and how this is perceived by those who are living as one: how they navigate and found their choices, experience the hermeneutical concepts of autonomy, competence and relatedness, as well as intrinsic motivations and external pressure. Since the research aims to understand a phenomenon from the perspective of those experiencing it, the means to achieve to achieve their world would require in-depth, qualitative interviews in a free-flow (hence semi-structured), and a thorough analysis of the language used when describing their experiences. Since the phenomenon seems to arise between the cracks of a society where reproduction is the norm, it was deemed essential to make the time and the space for these individuals to explain and share about their lived experience.

Quantitative aspects

The other method is a quantitative, convenience sampled online survey, which delves into reproductive attitudes of Norwegian adults. This method delves into the same concepts of the hermeneutical school, in that the survey aims to map motivation and pressure, a primarily relatedness, as well as competence and autonomy. A part of how the childfree navigate their choices, is how they are perceived and accepted in society. As the capabilities approach posits that the capability of a person is not merely freedoms in theory, but real opportunities that people wish to do and value, which relies on relatedness through family, a locality or the larger society (Crocker, 1995: 162) the prevalence of acceptance of the phenomenon is therefore paramount to map. This is done to underline the capability that a population of respondents provides for the childfree state of being. Another point was to collect the frequencies of reproductive intention on a larger scale.

Rationale for choosing mixed methods

Although some writers argue on mixed methods research being generally unfeasible and bring their own strengths and weaknesses, they can combine a more comprehensive account of the area of enquiry (Bryman, 2012: 629-633). While qualitative and quantitative methods are often visualized as two roads to different paradigms, yet they are argued by others to not be dichotomous and discrete (Tashakkori and Teddlie, 2009). The key motivation for its employment in this area of research was the balance of depth and breadth that it allows to balance: the comprehensive understanding of both the personal, lived experiences of childfree individuals and the broader attitudes exhibited towards these individuals from a larger sample.

The hermeneutical concepts exploration are especially adept at explaining qualitatively, the motivations and experiences of external pressure of the interviewee's own words and context (Bryman, 2012: 560-561). On the other hand, through a quantitative survey we can analyse relationships between variables, to better understand of reproductive attitudes of a population (Bryman, 2012: 341). It aims to provide a more nuanced picture of the capabilities and opportunities available to individuals (Sen, 1999: 126) who choose not to have children. The survey method is employed in collecting data on reproductive intentions of a larger sample of Norwegian adults, which in turn helps understanding the frequency and distribution of childfree choices across different demographics, providing a view more on the macro-level of the phenomenon.

This approach gives me as a researcher qualitative data which not only allows me to retrieve access to respondents' perspectives, but the quantitative data will allow more specific issues which has grown of interest during the unfolding thesis (Bryman, 2012: 647).

Employing mixed methods can to some degree enhance generalizability, by involving a larger sample size and statistical analysis, it can augment that the insights gained from individual experiences are reflective of broader patterns. The triangulation opportunities offered by mixed-methods is additionally one of its' strengths, which can add to the validity and reliability of the research results (Bryman, 2012: 635), which will be covered later in this chapter. Yet, there are naturally possibilities of shortcomings by the hand of dividing the scope between two lenses.

Limitations of mixed methods

While in-depth qualitative interviews offer a detailed insight into the personal experiences, they inhibit certain limitations. The subjective nature of qualitative data means that findings might not be generalizable to all Norwegian adults considering or already affiliated with being childfree.

The online survey, while useful for capturing broad data on reproductive attitudes among Norwegian adults may not capture the depth and nuance of individual experiences and motivations. In addition, survey responses are limited by the questions posed, which might be bound to not fully encompass the sheer complexity of factors that influences reproductive choices. There is a potential of selection bias, as respondents who choose to participate in the survey might not be representative of the wider population.

There is also a potential pitfall in that by straying from mono-method research (i.e. sticking to either a qualitative or quantitative method) might overshadow the original purpose of the study, and distort

rather than enhance the picture portrayed through the research. They can after all seem incompatible, based on the underlying purpose: one aims to test theory and the other aims to generate theory (Bryman, 2012: 36, 629). This section is not extensive, and will be comprehensively reviewed after the presentation of each respective methods' description and application in this chapter. Yet it is important to not envision a gulf between the methods, but rather see them as two different 'strains' of answering the research question.

Qualitative Methodology

We can source and learn about experiences and perspectives on the real world by interacting with other people and getting to know them, as far as my understanding go, and the conversation is an essential form of human connection. If we want to learn something about the narrative that they inhabit, we can through conversations be brought into the world they live in (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015: 17). The qualitative method is an approach that generates meaning, and paves the way for the opportunity to interpret and dive deep with empiric data.

Phenomenology has been relevant to the clarification of the form of understanding in qualitative research. The science theory posits that the important reality is the one which human beings experience. The semi-structured interview seeks to collect the descriptions from the interviewees and their living narrative, with the outlook of interpreting the meaning of the described phenomenon's. It is done by the framework of an interview guide, which contains suggestions to questions and the sequence they might be asked in. This gives the interviewee leeway in how to replay, as well as the possibility of picking up on replies of the respondent and asking questions outside the guide (Bryman, 2012: 471).

The interview guide contains a guide to the research question, as well as the everyday language of the respondents, which synthesizes a structure of the interview progression, where the guide has been categorized into subjects. The guide takes its position in Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017), where the goal is to understand the respondents' social and experienced world through the main topic of being childfree in a Norwegian context. SDT focuses on the motivational aspects of human behaviour, and it provides a perspective that may complement, while inspecting the reasons behind the choice of being childfree. This theory is employed to research the effect and importance of intrinsic motivation, which builds satisfaction and confidence towards well-being, and how this intersects with extrinsic pressure, which presents coercion and accountability for the

act of being childfree. How this converge with their feeling of autonomy, competence and relatedness, will be illuminated by the experiences and narratives that they convey.

Interview process and ethical considerations

The purpose of the interviews is to collect different points of view. My interviews can be characterized as empathic and acknowledging through the shared insight into the life of the respondents who gets an arena to share their perspective without anything but a curious and unjudging mind in front of them, which might not always be the case. However, it does not close the door on the asymmetrical relation between me as an analytic and the respondent. Before the interviews, the arrangements were made to book a quiet and undisturbed room at the University Campus, meeting prepared before the time that was agreed upon, and have a H1N Zoom recorder and my interview guide on a sheet of paper ready. This was done deliberately to have as few disturbing elements during the interview as possible, and promoting a relaxed atmosphere. Keeping the interview guide on a screen between me and the respondent could give the impression that I was unfocused, which would be avoided at all costs, as it could affect the response and their depth.

The research interview is in reality a professional conversation, where the structural positions in the interview revolves around my scientific interest in the topic. This structure will be made through my initiation and definition of the interview situation and topic, ask questions and decide which answers to follow, and when and how to end the conversation. This is to have a flexible latitude, which opens for further questions, and pursue views and themes that the interview guide might lead to, as well as being able to juggle with the sequence of the questions (Bryman, 2012: 471). This however do not imply that I will not be responsible for my ethical attitude when generating knowledge (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015: 54-57). The only interview that was done remote, through Zoom, was the one with Nakkerud, yet under the same premises as mentioned above.

The study received ethical approval from Sikt (Norwegian Agency for Shared Services in Education and Research), ensuring that the research design and methods adhered to the ethical standards of research involving human subjects and philosophical conviction. This approval process included a review of the interview protocols, consent forms, and measures for data protection.

Processing data

All interviews and communication with the respondents are gone through with on Norwegian, which is the context of the study. Ahead of the interview, the respondents will be informed about the ordinate goals of the study, and the implications of their participation. This is to prepare them for what topic will be discussed, the expectation of time required, which were set to around 45 minutes to an hour, and the frame for the interview. All respondents will have to give their informed consent before partaking in the interview, to ensure them that they are under safe conditions. The respondents are also informed about their right to pull out of the interview at any time, before, during or after. This could also be a setback on the quality for the research if they so choose (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015: 118-119).

The interviews are as mentioned chosen to be recorded through an audio recorder of the type H1N Zoom, which is a physical recorder with an internal SD-card, and no means of connecting to the internet, other than when transferring data. The recorder is chosen for my concentration about the subject of the interview and its dynamic, and is a device I am well familiar with beforehand, to ensure its function throughout the whole interview. All voice recording will thereafter be transferred to the OneDrive-account that is connected to my university account, which requires two-factor authentication for access from another device than the one I work on. This requires my utmost security measures, leaving my computer locked when briefly unattended in public spaces.

The interviews are thereafter processed through Autotekst, which is a transcription service operated by the University of Oslo, and have secure servers and log-in through 'Feide', which the university log-in used for all other of my services as a student as described above. This service lets me bypass the basal transcription convention (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015: 239), and is able to translate the text from Norwegian to English through OpenAI's speech recognition service Whisper, and is thereafter possible to download as a basic text-format (.txt). This translation is naturally not without fault, but eases the workload previously linked to the transcription process.

This is where my analytical process begins, where editing the faults of the transcription service lets me interpreted the described phenomenon's about being childfree in a Norwegian context. Part of the exercise hereafter went into properly interpreting and conveying the meaning of the respondents in an appropriate manner into English, to eventually be presented as data and quotes. Translation is not necessarily an unproblematic process, and should not be taken lightly. Yet the test of stamina saved on having the bulk being translated by Autotekst did listening to the audio for corrections and identifying themes more of an enjoyable task.

To protect the privacy of the participants, strict confidentiality and anonymity measures were implemented. In the thesis empirical contribution, they are strictly identified by number, their gender, level of education and approximate age (i.e. female, late-twenties). Other than securely protecting transcripts and voice recordings appropriately, the SD-cards used to store the audio was thereafter destroyed, in strict lines with the loan conditions of the voice recorder and Sikt.

Coding and condensing my data into meaning has taken its foundation from my theoretical understanding. It was analysed themes in the interviews, with its' foundation in Self-Determination Theory, and involved me identifying passages of text that could be categorized under the concepts of autonomy, competence and relatedness, as well as collecting instances of extrinsic motivation and intrinsic motivation. To saturate these concepts, the interviews were presented as complementary to one another, trying to present a coherent picture of the childfree narrative and experience: what makes them tick and what impacts them. The intended process of my analytical work was to combine quotes and excerpts from the interviews, with theory, research and empirical findings (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2015: 276-277).

Sampling Method

The sample will contain a scholar which is scientifically invested in the subject and who ponders upon perspectives in this connection. This will make out one of two unique selections of relevant participants: one with a professional and one selection with respondents inhibiting the characteristics of what is defined as a childfree individual, i.e. one that explicitly and intently does not want children (Blackstone and Stewart, 2013: 720). The difference of the selections demands two different interview guides and information letters, and most importantly, the childfree individuals will be analysed, while the associate professor Nakkerud will be an analytical voice to the discussion.

The childfree selection in question will be the data from respondents who can be defined as such and who can help convey a picture of their narrative. The group in question call for the sampling to be of a purposive nature, as they have the characteristics needed for the data collection.

The thesis will not sway in a particular preference of one particular gendered narrative, but to balance the data, it is ideal to pursue an as equal number of male and female respondents as possible, yet be open to other encountering other genders and their narrative. This is to seek a reflected view of how narratives intersect and differentiates. The respondents were sampled through

a snowball sample, where a respondent refers to another in a related chain. Through searches throughout the local network, a possibility opened for a conversation with a respondent in my extended network, through an acquaintance. The respondents were thereafter sampled by the referral to each other until the last respondent was unable to connect me with a new respondent.

The respondent's demographical background were all Norwegians raised in Norway. They were interviewed on Campus Kristiansand at the University of Agder before and after the summer of 2023. Three had finished their master's degree, and one was very close to completion. The sample consisted of two females and two males. Such a sample was a suitable equilibrium for getting narratives that were gender-nuanced and representativeness among the sexes. The respondent's ages ranged between late twenties and mid-thirties. This was a coincidence, as there were no set target age range for respondents, yet makes the respondents relatively homogeneous, which has a lower amount of variation, and can therefore be of a smaller sample (Bryman, 2012: 200). Despite the qualitative empirical data consisting of a relatively small sample, this is mirrored to insightful research on the topic, such as Fjell (2008: 17) who have contributed to the field of reproductive attitudes through interviewing as few participants.

Interview guide

The interview guide is structured into four main sections: background and expectations, sustainability, conditions, and future outlook. These thematic sections were developed based on the research question concerning how Norwegian adults integrate personal and environmental factors into their decision to be childfree.

Background and Expectations: This section aims to explore the motivations behind the decision to be childfree. It goes into how this choice was perceived by the respondents' families and partners, as well as whether they felt societal expectations played a role. Additionally, it investigates how they engaged with others when discussing their decision.

Sustainability: In this thematic checkpoint, it was inquired about the respondents' views on sustainability and environmental aspects, and how they perceive it in the context of their childfree lifestyle. Their broader intentions and self-perception were also examined.

Conditions: This section examines various hypotheses related to the decision to be childfree, providing a different perspective on their motivations. It explores their previous notions about parenthood, including any prior desire to become parents, as well as the perceived advantages and disadvantages of having or not having children. It also considers hypothetical scenarios, such as the

possibility of freezing reproductive material for future use or reconsidering their choice.

Outlooks: The final section delves into the representation of the childfree discourse, alternative forms of nurturing, and the broader societal implications of a declining population, often referred to as the "elder wave" (the Norwegian term "eldrebølge" is used). This section also inquired about the respondents' views on the global development trajectory and offered an open space for them to share any additional perspectives or thoughts related to the topic.

Rationale of qualitative interviews

The semi-structured nature of the interviews allowed for rich, in-depth explorations of the personal and environmental factors influencing the decision to be childfree. This approach enabled respondents to share their experiences, thoughts, and feelings in a detailed and nuanced manner, providing rich qualitative data. The achievement of topic saturation within the interviews indicates that the discussions were thorough and comprehensive in covering the key aspects relevant to the research question. This suggests that the data collected was sufficient to develop a deep understanding of the central themes.

While the homogeneity of the sample is a limitation in terms of diversity, it also allows for focused insights into a particular segment of the childfree population: cis-gendered individuals with a higher education and aged between their late-twenties and mid-thirties. This can be valuable in understanding specific patterns and trends within this group, as they are familiar with the topic and relevant in terms of their reproductive ability. The findings from these interviews provide a foundational understanding of the topic, which can inform and shape future research.

The qualitative approach allowed for adaptability and responsiveness during the interviews. The semi-structured format meant that the interviews could be tailored to the flow of the conversation, ensuring that all relevant topics were thoroughly explored (Bryman, 2021: 471).

Limitations of qualitative data

The research incorporated four semi-structured interviews, sampled through a snowball sample.

While snowball sampling is practical in identifying respondents, it may not provide a comprehensive representation of the broader population. The small sample size limits the generalizability of the findings to all individuals who identify as childfree in Norway.

Although the interviews achieved a high saturation of topics, this saturation within a small and homogenous sample might not capture the full spectrum of experiences and perspectives existing

within the larger childfree community. The depth achieved in each interview is valuable, yet it is crucial to acknowledge that these insights may not encompass the diversity of reasons, motivations, and experiences of all childfree individuals. The homogeneous nature of the respondent group in terms of demographics, socio-economic status, or cultural backgrounds could limit the breadth of insights. This homogeneity may overlook the nuanced differences that could emerge from a more diverse participant pool.

While there are limitations to the qualitative interviews conducted, the rationale behind their use and the insights they provide are valuable to the overall research. They offer an in-depth understanding of the childfree phenomenon from the perspectives of the individuals interviewed, setting the stage for further exploration in this field. This concludes the qualitative part of this chapter, and moves to the quantitative realm.

Quantitative Methodology

In order to measure whether one thing has effect on another, quantitative research methods are employed, and make use of numerical representation of subject matter. It can be outlined as a research strategy that emphasizes quantification, or measurement, in terms of analysis and collection of data (Bryman, 2012: 36). Measurement is the process that researchers utilize to describe and connect meaning to the phenomena they are investigating, as well as concepts and key facts. In general, the larger the sample size, or quantity, the more generalizable a form of research becomes, yet a large sample cannot guarantee precision. In quantitative research, we are often concerned with being able to say that findings can be generalized beyond the confines of particular contexts within the conduct of the research, as well as replicated by other researchers (Bryman: 176-179). However, increasing a sample size increases the likely precision of a sample. Sample sizes are affected by considerations of time and cost, which calls for decisions regarding the sample size to compromise between these considerations (Bryman, 2012: 197). As a sole researcher conducting this study, precision remains crucial. The precision level increases notably from 100 to 200 respondents but starts to decline in cost-effectiveness beyond 1,000 respondents. However, it's essential to acknowledge that quantitative data can sometimes provide a false sense of precision and accuracy due to potential variations in respondents' interpretations of terms. The word 'freedom' might mean something different to different individuals, which calls for a plain and unambiguous wording.

A survey is the chosen format to reach a large number of respondents and collect data on reproductive attitudes in Norway. The key points to ensure in a survey is to build it with a clearly worded and concise nature, which makes the survey more accessible and less of a burden for participants to complete. Employing a survey gives the possibility to research variation, in respect of reproductive attitudes, as well as perception of the childfree. It allows for variables to be collected simultaneously through an online participation, and for an accessible sampling.

Survey design

The survey was meticulously designed to be concise and user-friendly, ensuring a smooth and logical progression of questions. This brevity was intentional, aimed at making the survey appealing to potential participants by requiring minimal investment in time and effort. Comprising just six questions, the survey primarily utilized closed-ended queries with categorical responses. This format meant that the options available to participants were fixed and non-hierarchical, allowing for straightforward responses without the need for ranking (Bryman, 2012: 58).

At the conclusion of the survey, an optional text field was included. This addition was crucial as it provided respondents with the opportunity to elaborate on their answers, offering qualitative insights that might not be captured through the closed-ended format. This open-ended section was designed to gather richer, more detailed perspectives, thereby enhancing the depth of the data collected. The survey was preliminary tested with five respondents to control for possible errors. This identified adding the option of ticking of "Health" in the reason for the respondent's reproductive decision.

Questions were formulated to uncover respondents' attitudes toward individuals who choose a childfree lifestyle. These questions explored various personal reasons for reproductive choices, including categories such as "My own wish, Life partner, Economy, Climate, Political (in)stability, War, Health, Ambitions, and Other (fill in)." Respondents were allowed to select up to three reasons to avoid confining them to a single overarching motive. Additionally, the survey inquired about perceptions of reproduction as a societal duty and participants' sense of relating to childfree individuals. These aspects were essential in capturing both societal views and individual motivations for choosing a childfree life.

Demographic information, particularly age groups, was collected to provide valuable context to the responses. This inclusion ensured that no participants under 18 years of age were included, thereby avoiding the need for parental consent. Notably, the survey avoided using the term 'childfree' and instead employed the phrase "people who choose not to have children" to prevent potential confusion among respondents who might not be familiar with the thematic terminology. This survey design was carefully considered to strike a balance between comprehensive data collection and practicality, respecting respondents' time and experiences while gathering information relevant to the study's objectives.

Omitting gender

One notable aspect of the survey design is the omission of a question related to gender. This decision is underpinned by several considerations. While gender dynamics play a pivotal role in societal perceptions of reproduction and are commonly addressed in social sciences research, the survey's design was guided by a commitment to explore other dimensions of these issues. Additionally, the focus was placed on ensuring participant comfort, maintaining survey simplicity, and mitigating potential gender bias. By excluding a gender identity question, the survey aimed to reduce the likelihood of bias arising from participants' perceptions of how their gender should inform their responses to questions about reproductive attitudes. This approach was also in the hope of fostering a more inclusive and comfortable environment for participants, potentially leading to more candid and comprehensive responses, as well as higher completion rates.

It's important to emphasize that the survey's primary objective is to gain a broad understanding of societal attitudes toward the phenomenon under investigation, for which extensive mapping of gender identities was not deemed essential. However, it's acknowledged that this decision limits the study's ability to discern gender-specific nuances in attitudes toward choosing a childfree lifestyle, despite the existing body of literature on gendered expectations in society regarding reproduction (Cools and Strøm, 2020: 46). Exploring these gendered nuances in perceptions about the childfree could constitute a specific area for future research.

Distribution

The survey designed to gather insights into societal attitudes toward childfree individuals and personal reproductive choices was disseminated through the Facebook platform. The choice of Facebook as the distribution medium was predicated on several factors. Firstly, Facebook offers a

wide-reaching and accessible platform, allowing for the easy sharing of the survey across diverse groups and communities. The distribution process entailed posting the survey link through a personal profile, accompanied by a concise Norwegian description outlining the study's purpose, nature, minimal time commitment, and an invitation to participate.

The primary rationale for employing Facebook as the distribution medium was its extensive user base, facilitating the survey's reach to a diverse audience and potentially enhancing the number and variety of respondents. The possibilities of sharing content on Facebook made it possible for the survey link to travel, extending its outreach beyond the initial network. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that this approach may have implications for the composition of the sample, a point that will be expounded upon in the limitations section and sampling bias. Using Facebook as a distribution channel proved itself to be cost-effective, incurring no financial resources.

The survey itself was administered via SurveyXact, a survey service for which the university holds a license. Importantly, this service does not log the IP addresses of participants, ensuring the privacy and confidentiality of respondents. Moreover, it circumvented the need for additional approval by the research project from Sikt, the national data and research institution.

Sampling Bias

Relying on Facebook may introduce sampling bias, as the survey would primarily reach individuals who use the platform, potentially excluding those who do not. Participants who chose to respond might have specific interests or opinions about the topic, which may not be representative of the broader population. Without specific targeting tools, controlling for demographic variables such as age and nationality status is challenging, potentially affecting the representativeness of the sample. Participants might have had concerns about privacy, given the public nature of Facebook, which could influence their decision to participate or the honesty of their responses, despite measures taken to relieve this concern. The success of the survey distribution was also partly dependent on the willingness of individuals and groups to share the survey link, which could vary widely. In the end, Facebook provided a convenient and effective way to distribute the survey, yet these advantages came with certain limitations in terms of potential biases and representativeness.

Data analysis

The data collected from the survey was accumulated and processed using SurveyXact, a versatile tool known for its data analysis capabilities. One of the key strengths of SurveyXact is its ability to

generate various visual representations and reports. This feature enables a clear and engaging presentation of the data, making it easier to identify patterns and trends. Graphical representations such as line graphs will be employed to illustrate the distribution of responses across different categories.

A significant aspect of the analysis involves filtering values and cross-tabulating data. This process allows for a detailed examination of how different variables, or tabulations, interact with each other. For instance, responses can be cross-tabulated to observe how different age groups or demographics correlate with specific reproductive intentions or attitudes toward childfree individuals, which was tabulated in Microsoft Excel.

A crucial part of the analysis focuses on one specific survey question, “What matters the most for your decision?” To interpret the responses effectively, a frequency table will be employed (Bryman, 2012: 337). This is to undertake a comparative analysis: by studying the frequencies of categories and understanding how these frequencies vary based on different denominators like age or stated reproductive intention.

For the qualitative responses collected in the optional text field at the end of the survey, a thematic analysis was conducted. This involved identifying common themes and patterns. This qualitative analysis provided depth and context to the quantitative data, offering a richer understanding of the participants' perspectives. Throughout the data analysis process, measures were taken to ensure the rigor and accuracy of the findings. These included double-checking data entries (such as identifying possible duplicates by checking the entry time), verifying the correctness of the statistical calculations, and critically evaluating the data to avoid misinterpretation. In the end, results were interpreted in the context of the existing literature on childfree choices, demographic statistics, and societal attitudes. This approach ensured that the findings were not only based on empirical data but were also grounded in the broader theoretical context and scope of the study.

Limitations

There are other noteworthy limitations identified in this method worth to acknowledge, besides the already explained gender omission and sampling bias. One of which is to not make use of more advanced statistical methods that can control further for statistical significance by for instance establishing a null hypothesis (Bryman, 2012: 348).

The already mentioned risk of a homogeneous sample composition is related to the survey

distribution method. By using social media for distribution, it might provide a sample that lacks diversity and those who are not active on social media. This might not fully represent the broader population of Norwegian adults, and might be for some seen as too informal a sampling frame. Linked to this, is the representativeness of the sample, as participants will not be selected through a random sampling method. Additionally, those who choose to participate might also have certain characteristics or interests that influenced their decision to participate. We bear in mind the relationship found by Savelieva et al., (2023: 257) in Finland, that links frequent social media usage to lowered fertility and its possible implication upon the distribution channel.

By confining the format with closed-ended questions, it might limit the depth of information, forcing respondents to choose from predetermined options. This might not fully capture the complexity of their attitudes and motivations, which is countered by a free-text field.

Although these are all methods that can be applied in further research, the method of the study holds its strength in its' practical relevance. Even without complex statistical analysis, the results can offer valuable contributions to understanding the societal attitudes towards childfree individuals and personal reproductive choices.

Data

The survey saw an encouraging level of participation over five days during autumn 2023, and was closed after receiving less than five responses in 24 hours. Out of the 387 surveys distributed, a substantial 75.58% (or 291 surveys) were fully completed. This high completion rate reflects strong engagement with the subject matter. On the other hand, only 3% of the surveys (10 in total) were partially completed, and the non-response rate stood at 22%. The relatively low rates of partial completions and non-responses suggest that the survey was well-received and relevant to the respondents. The respondents were categorized into the following age groups: 18-25, 26-30, 31-35, 36-40, 41-45, and 46+. The oldest age group, 46+, is particularly noteworthy as these respondents are likely above the typical reproductive age, offering a unique perspective. The respondents were divided between the age groups the following way (where N equals the number of respondents):

Age groups						
	18-25 (N=17)	26-30 (N=73)	31-35 (N=72)	36-40 (N=20)	41-45 (N=14)	46+ (N=95)

Table M1 – Age groups

The survey's respondent distribution across age groups reveal some interesting facts to take on. The majority of respondents fall within the 26-30 (N=73) and 31-35 (N=72) age brackets, as well as the 46+ age group (N=95). Combined, these groups constitute 82%, or 240 of the total 291 respondents. This concentration in specific age groups provides a substantial data pool for analysing reproductive attitudes within these cohorts. Further characteristics are found in the second part of the analysis chapter, which interprets the survey results.

Validity and reliability of participants

The substantial number of respondents in the 26-35 and 46+ age groups enhances the validity of findings within these cohorts. The representation of all age groups allows for a more accurate and detailed understanding of the attitudes and perspectives prevalent in these age ranges. These age groups represent diverse life stages, from early adulthood to post-reproductive years. This diversity is beneficial for understanding how reproductive attitudes and perceptions towards childfree individuals might shift with age and life experience. The age distribution aligns well with the target population for the study, particularly those in prime reproductive age according to the average aged mother (30,1 years) and father (32,1 years) (SSB, 2023). This alignment ensures that the survey findings are relevant and reflective of the population which are most related to the research question.

Reliability of the survey findings is strengthened by the potential for consistency in responses across these age groups. With a significant number of respondents in each key age bracket, it is possible to compare and contrast attitudes within and between these groups, adding reliability to the patterns and trends identified. The number of respondents in each age group, especially those with the highest representation, implies that the sample size is sufficiently heterogeneous and adequate for drawing reliable conclusions about those particular age cohorts.

Potential sample limitations

While the 36-40 and 41-45 age groups have smaller representations (N=20 and N=14, respectively), it's important to acknowledge that these smaller sample sizes may limit the generalizability of findings specifically for these age ranges. However, the overall sample distribution still provides a solid foundation for understanding broader trends and attitudes across different life stages.

The distribution of respondents across these age groups will be instrumental in analysing reproductive attitudes and how they may differ among various stages of adulthood.

Among the reasons provided for reproductive attitudes, 6% of respondents included their own reason. This indicates that while the survey captured a broad and relatively saturated range of motivations, some respondents felt the need to express unique or personal reasons that were not initially listed in the survey options.

Qualitative Insights

The free-text section of the survey prompted a notable response, with 46 participants providing qualitative insights. These responses ranged from brief comments to more extensive reflections, enriching the dataset with diverse personal narratives and perspectives. This qualitative input will be invaluable for adding depth to the quantitative findings, offering a more nuanced understanding of the respondents' views and experiences related to childfree individuals.

The combination of quantitative data, supplemented by the qualitative insights and additional reasons provided by respondents, will offer a comprehensive view of the attitudes and perceptions surrounding childfree individuals in Norway. This rich dataset serves as a solid foundation for a detailed analysis, allowing for a multifaceted exploration of the research question.

This gave the opportunity for respondents to leave a reply of sorts, where a handful commented about the survey's relevance, many stating that they found it an important and engaging topic to discuss. This feedback serves as an additional validation of the survey's design and content.

Triangulation of mixed methods

The validity of this study is bolstered by the use of a mixed-methods approach, which allows for triangulation of data sources. The qualitative data obtained from in-depth interviews provide rich, detailed insights into the personal experiences and perspectives of individuals who are childfree. This is complemented by quantitative data from the online survey, which offers broader statistical context about the reproductive attitudes of Norwegian adults. The qualitative data aids in interpreting and giving context to the quantitative findings, while the quantitative data can validate or challenge the insights gained from qualitative analysis. The mix of these data sources may enhance the credibility and validity of the findings.

Summary

In this chapter we are rounding off, there has been shown a mixed-methods approach, combining semi-structured qualitative interviews with childfree individuals and an expert scholar, along with a quantitative online survey targeting a wider Norwegian adult population. This approach is designed to balance the in-depth exploration of personal experiences and societal perceptions with broader demographic trends related to perception of childfree individuals. The qualitative interviews delve into motivations and societal pressures using the lens of Self-Determination Theory, while the quantitative survey assesses reproductive attitudes and includes an open-ended section for nuanced responses. Despite potential limitations like sample representativeness and the challenge of balancing two methodological lenses, this mixed-methods approach provides a comprehensive framework to capture the complexity of the childfree phenomenon. As we transition into the analysis chapter, these methodologies lay the groundwork for interpreting the data and uncovering insights about how Norwegian adults navigate their choice to be childfree amidst environmental and personal factors.

Analysis part one - Interviews

As we enter the last portion of the thesis and move into the analytics, we will briefly be re-introduced to the topic, the chosen theory and the framework of deciphering the topic. In recent years, societal attitudes towards childbearing have undergone significant shifts, as witnessed by fertility rates around Europe and the world. In Norway, there is evidence for a "subjective turn" in fertility decisions which has been growing (Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023). This chapter aims to illuminate the personal realities that surrounds the respondents, and shedding light upon the individual nuances and complexities which are tied to having a childfree life.

With the research design consisting of two separate groups of interviewees: one selection who identify as childfree, and one interview with a relevant scholar in the field, the analysis will in this chapter focus on the interviews held with the first selection, and the latter interview with Nakkerud appear in the discussion. This comparative analysis will highlight how each respondents' unique experiences and motivations align or contrast with each other, providing a richer understanding of the childfree choice. The latter selection will be used in reinforcing a frame around the sociocultural motivations and changes therein, as well as political attitudes and discourse.

By incorporating Nakkerud's (2021) ideological dilemmas during the summaries of the interviews, we examine the prevalence of liberalism (individual freedom), biologism (instinct vs. ecological impact of offspring), globalism (low fertility rates in Western countries vs. high emission output per Western capita), humanism (avoid children growing up in dystopic surroundings vs. bearing offspring to combat dystopic predictions) and sustainable development (economic, ecological, and social sustainability – such as the climate crisis vs. the loss of taxpayers and caretakers). The aim is to identify these notions where they appear.

The analysis will find itself rooted within the frame of self-determination theory (SDT), which will let us focus on the degree of which an individual's behaviour is based upon self-motivation and self-determination. This approach is particularly relevant in understanding the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations behind choosing a childfree lifestyle, as delineated in Nakkerud's ideological dilemmas. The theory comes in two parts: reasons for one's behaviour and whether motivations can be attributed to come from within or from external sources (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 10). Part one is split in three parts: *autonomy, competence and relatedness*.

Autonomy refers to the persons' belief of being in control of its' behaviour and goals. It emphasizes the freedom of making one's own choices, based on values and interests, free of external pressure.

Competence involves the individual response of feeling capable and effective in achieving desired results, being confident in one's ability to succeed. *Relatedness* revolves around a sense of belonging, and connection to others through meaningful and caring relationships.

The second part of SDT is the dichotomy of *intrinsic* and *extrinsic motivations*, or rather, whether behaviour seems to be established on the presence of inward desires or outside pressure (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 14). Using these metrics can help us answer whether the respondents are choosing to be childfree due to intrinsic parameters, such as fulfilment or personal preference, or extrinsic, such as societal pressures, environmental concerns or economic factors. After the summaries of the interviews, SDT will be applied in the search of common and diverging ground between the respondents.

Respondent #1: Male, mid-thirties.

The interviewee's decision not to have children is primarily based on self-reflection and philosophical considerations. His decision relies on thoughts about the impact of having children on

their life, society's role in supporting or hindering parenthood, and the ethical aspects of being a parent. Much of his choice to not have children is however related to how his partnership is understood, despite his background before he met his partner:

"I think my attitude has been generally I don't want children, but under very good circumstances I could have. When I have a partner who doesn't want children, and I envision that life as pretty good, then we end up with that. In all practical terms we don't want children, and that comes from the cooperation we have in our relationship."

The interviewee has experienced some societal expectations regarding parenthood, particularly from school and other parents. Still, it is communicated that the closest friends and family have not pressured him to have children, but granting room and space for the respondent make decisions on his own. When reminiscing about reproductive norms in retrospective of his childhood, he stated that: *"it's a part of being a part of society to get children."*

Loneliness was brought up as a topic during the interview, but it was not something the respondent feared, nor felt was reason to procreate, stating that he felt sure he would not be lonely as long as his mind and his wits were intact. He pointed to online activities, which made sure he would be able to socialize.

Affiliation among parents is however mentioned in this connection, and how being childfree calls for answering more questions than having children to others. When asked about the advantages of having children, he mentions:

"You got a lot of closeness. You get a life project. You don't have to think about what you do. Because the meaning of what you do is obvious. You are going to create good citizens for the next generation."

This illuminates a potential struggle of having to explain his 'meaning', when being childfree. His choice to be childfree seems to be a distinct exercise of personal freedom. This decision reflects a modern interpretation of *liberalism* where individual choices, particularly concerning lifestyle and family, are reshuffled. His narrative underscores an alteration of values, and awareness of societal values, where notions of traditional family structures triumphs individual autonomy.

Freedom and future

The respondent acknowledges that societal expectations around parenting are different for men and women. He emphasizes the importance of body autonomy and the impact of these expectations on

their choice. The subject identify as childfree, based on the belief in the value of individual freedom, and pointed out in this relation that *"everyone wants to be free"*. In the context of a question that asks about which conditions could make the respondent reconsider being childfree, he shares the dichotomy of social control that entails reproductive choice:

"I am a little wary of social control. In Norway, we live in a very free country, if we don't have children. Extremely free. No one tells you what to do. You just don't cross each other's lines, and it is fine. It is a simple rule to follow. But when you have children, everything you do affects the children. The state is very strict about that. I don't know how much of the family feeling is still there."

The interviewee shows concern about the future, and believes that the world is undergoing rapid changes. However, this was expressed with optimism, and did in this connection express that he does not believe being a parent would be enjoyable due to its more limiting responsibility: *"I think we are living in a very interesting time. It can turn out very positive, it can turn out very negative. [...] I think it leads to a lot of instability. And instability is often against children"*. His reflections on the future and ethical considerations about bringing children into uncertain circumstances demonstrate traces of a *humanistic* ideology. By weighing the moral implications of parenting in a potentially demanding future against the human desire to reproduce, the respondent ties personal decisions to global concerns.

Ecology and blunt talk

It was further talked about the importance of sustainability, particularly concerning the environment. As the respondent have a background in environmental volunteer work and express a sense of responsibility in terms of reducing carbon emissions, he noted that not having children is often seen as an effective way to reduce one's carbon footprint. The respondents' emphasis on sustainability and his background highlight the significance of ecological considerations in his decision. His choice aligns with a growing recognition of the need for sustainable development practices in a larger scale, yet balancing ecological concerns with personal life choices.

"I'm a vegan. Part of the motivation for what I do is the environment. But I don't think individual action is the way to solve the climate crisis. We have to change it with incentives. As a society we should think about sustainability a lot. As individuals we should follow the incentives we are given."

Open and direct communication about the decision not to have children is important to the respondent. He expressed a frustration with how some discussions around this topic are presented and would rather prefer more direct conversations and engage with different perspectives, rather than 'beat around the bush'. It is in this relation that the respondent expressed a critical view of how environmental arguments for not having children (such as Wynes and Nicholas, 2017) were sometimes presented:

" I think most people have realized that the best thing you can do regarding climate is not to have a child. And one is better than two, and zero is better than one. It's always like that. I don't understand this incremental argument at all. [...] It's so boring to listen to. Say what you mean. Don't put it in a box, do one less thing."

The respondent also expresses an eagerness in how much his viewpoints can be relatable to others, and where he will find himself on the scale of being childfree in connection with others: *" I'm very curious about, among childfree, if I have a different perspective than others. Because I don't know that. But that's our own bubble"*. Overall, the interviewee's perspective is rooted in self-reflection, environmental concerns, and the desire for personal freedom.

Respondent #2: Female, late twenties.

The interviewee did consider having children earlier in her life because of societal expectations, but later realized that she *"genuinely did not want children"*. She expressed the societal pressure on women to have children and the expectations that are laid upon them in this regard.

She acknowledges the societal and biological pressures to have children but ultimately decides based on personal reflections:

"[...] it's from the little things that I'm always being nudged about, that society just puts it on you, that you're going to have children, everyone is going to have children."

This indicates a shift in *biologism*, where individual agency takes precedence over biological and societal expectations. Her journey from societal pressure to personal realization also exemplifies the essence of *liberalism* in the context of reproductive choices. Her narrative highlights how modern liberalism supports personal choices, even when they diverge from societal expectations.

Sharing the choice and making meaning

The respondent explained how she presented to people her choice to not have children: initially by avoiding to discuss it with new acquaintances, but gradually became more open with her friends and partner. Her decision was influenced by getting older, seeing the challenges of parenthood, and the responsibility it entails. She had considered the potential loneliness of not having children, but have recognized other support systems and sources of companionship, such as family. The most desirable aspect of being a parent was to *"give a little bit of yourself, a little wisdom"*, stating that *"with the profession I chose [as a teacher], there are several ways I can have children in life, without them being my responsibility"*.

Considerations about loneliness versus personal fulfilment display a perspective that focus on personal well-being and happiness rather than conforming to societal norms were frequently fronted by the respondent.

There were suggestions by the respondent that she perceived that talking about not having children, as well as not having them was more socially accepted now than before, indicating that social pressure had a larger role in previous generations. Her observations about the changing societal acceptance of childfree lifestyles reflect notions of a shift in attitudes towards reproduction and personal choice. About sharing her choice of not wanting children to her parents, she said the following:

" I think in the beginning, my parents were like, that's just what you're saying now. When you get older, you want to have children. But I think they've started to realize that I actually mean it when I say it. And I've started to talk more with friends, and realize that more friends are at the same place."

She brings up an anecdote from a recent confirmation, where she was asked to write in an aspirational 'dream book'. One of the questions people were asked to fill out in the book was not whether the young confirmant was going to have children; *"... it was how many children he was going to get. And it was just the formulation. He is going to get as many children as he wants, if he does not want any children, he will not get any."* The respondent bears evidence of trying to enlighten that reproduction is a choice unto others, in a fashioned way of emphasizing that such a fundamental choice should be grounded in intrinsic motivations rather than extrinsic.

These extrinsic pressures are however present in the respondent's life every now and then, which means that she needs to reiterate the discussion about the pros and cons. The segment below is testament to her resilience, highlighting the crooked path to finding fulfilment in a partnership, and finding solace and power in her choice in her partner:

” If I had been with someone who absolutely wanted to have children, and I was satisfied with the relationship, and it was a deal breaker [to not have children], then I would have been more open to discuss it. I think I would have been in the same position regardless of the social pressure, but I probably wouldn't have talked about it openly. It has been a very stigmatic situation, and there has been a lot of pressure. You have to stand in it, why you don't want to have children, and take that talk every time, and get heard again and again, that you will change your mind, and just wait. It's a heavy discussion to take over and over again [...]. But as long as I had a partner who was on the same side, I would have been on the same conclusion.”

The respondent acknowledges the potential impact of a partner's desires on her decision-making process. This recognition points to the intricate interplay between individual autonomy and the compromises inherent in a partnership. Her statement above reveals the challenges and resilience involved in maintaining personal autonomy within the societal and relational contexts. Her narrative highlights the ongoing negotiation of personal choices, the emotional resilience needed to face societal stigma, the crucial role of a supportive partner, and the pursuit of personal fulfilment in the face of extrinsic pressures.

Sustainability and worries

The interviewee highlighted the importance of sustainability and its relevance to her decision not to have children, particularly the environmental impact. She discussed the potential implications of global population trends, particularly in the context of climate change. Her emphasis on environmental impact and climate change shows an alignment with Nakkerud's (2021) ideologic dilemma of *sustainable development*. Her decision is informed by an understanding of the environmental impact of global population trends, especially in relation to climate change. While the respondent recognizes the common argument - that not having children is beneficial for the environment, she clarifies that this is not her primary motivation: *”For me, it's a bit more of a thing to just throw in, because many other people use the same argument. For me personally, it's not an argument that the world might go down when my children get older”*.

The respondent expressed concern about the world's current state and potential conflicts, such as the possibility of a third world war, and how these worries affects her decision. The interviewee's concerns about the current state of the world and potential future conflicts reveal a global perspective on her decision-making. This outlook goes beyond personal or immediate considerations and reflects a sensitivity to the complexities and uncertainties of the world's future. Further, she emphasized that societal expectations and assumptions were not always accurate. In later years, "terrible births" were something some of her friends had gone through, which builds under her anxiety about giving birth:

" Because there are many things that can happen to a woman. Injuries, problems and complications. And when you're unsure if you want to have this baby to begin with, you end up with some extreme complications that make you struggle for the rest of your life. So to be able to freeze an egg, but also to have a surrogate [...] would have made it easier to make those decisions, when I personally have so much anxiety about being pregnant and giving birth."

Her statement sheds light on the importance of acknowledging and addressing these concerns of potential complications related to childbirth, which are legitimate and significant factors in the decision-making process around parenthood. The interviewee's perspective adds an important dimension to the discourse on childbirth and parenthood. It underscores the need for more open and honest conversations about the realities of childbirth, greater acknowledgment of the diverse experiences and concerns of prospective mothers, and the availability of alternative paths to parenthood that can accommodate different needs, preferences and ways of nurturing.

Overall, the interviewee's decision not to have children is influenced by various factors, including acknowledgement and awareness of societal and gendered pressure, environmental concerns, and the recognition of the responsibilities and implications of parenthood. She challenges the promaternal discourse repeatedly, but implies the possibility of compromise if that would be a deep yearning of her partner. She is open to other forms of parenthood, such as adoption, or securing her options by freezing eggs, but her choice seems firmly rooted in her personal feelings and beliefs.

Respondent #3: Male, early thirties.

The individual's decision not to have children appears to be grounded in their desire for personal autonomy and express a strong inclination to live life on their terms and are hesitant to sacrifice their freedom for parenthood. Earlier in the respondent's life, fear played a role in the choice of being childless, but this seems to have been replaced with a more content attitude in being childfree. Focus on personal autonomy, especially in the context of lifestyle choices, illustrates a *liberal* approach to family and personal life. His narrative speaks to the value placed on individual decision-making in modern society.

Pressure and environment

The interviewee notes societal expectations and pressures related to having children. It is suggested that there is a general expectation within their family and in society in general, that having children is the norm, and this expectation can create a sense of judgment or stigma for those who choose not to. He linked this to a form of egoism:

"Egoistic is a negative term, you know. Because it doesn't hurt anyone, except perhaps a grandmother or a grandfather who wants to have a child. But I look at it as egoistic nevertheless, because I just choose that I want to live my life the way I want to. And I just can't agree with the idea that I have to get so much happiness [by having a child], even though when you present the choice to other people [with children], they say that you will understand it when you get it, so to speak. But I can't agree with that idea, and I can't justify it to myself, that I should just try and see if I come to that conclusion, and then I end up with a child I actually maybe don't want. It's unfair to the child."

His labelling of this choice as "egoistic" underlines the societal perception that prioritizing personal autonomy over societal expectations of parenthood is selfish. This viewpoint challenges his capability to make autonomous decisions, despite relying on his personal values and his idea of happiness. When the respondent talks about the reactions he receives when sharing his choice to remain childfree, he notes experiencing "*very little positivity*," except from others who have also chosen to be childfree and who are positive about living life on their own terms. However, he feels that most people perceive his decision negatively, perhaps viewing it as "*weird and strange, or*

egoistic," even if they don't explicitly express this. This indicates a perceived sense of stigma or misunderstanding from others regarding his choice to not have children.

His acknowledgment of societal pressures and expectations about having children underlines the extrinsic motivations he faces. His perspective, "*I think people would have thought better of me if I chose to have children than if I didn't choose to have children*," demonstrates his awareness of societal norms and the potential stigma associated with deviating from these norms.

The discussion touched on the idea of sustainability and how it is connected to their decision. The individual reflects on the environmental and resource-related aspects of not having children. His reflections on environmental concerns and the societal implications of declining birth rates highlight an alignment with *sustainable development*, considering both ecological and societal sustainability in his decision-making process. The respondent showed openness to other forms of childcare, such as adoption or foster parenting, which indicates an openness to contributing to the well-being of children, and society in general. His concern for the societal shifts and their impact on future generations shows a *humanistic* approach, where the well-being of future children is a significant factor in his decision. By holding open the opportunity to give care in an alternative way, and not reproducing when he does not want to become a parent, shows promise of this.

Shifting reproductive attitudes

As a side note, the respondent expressed notions of a changing world and concerns about societal shifts, including a perceived rise of non-committal relationships. This, in their view, may impact the ability to find a stable partner for many and, by extension, influence decisions related to having children, and on a larger scale, be a cultural influence upon fertility. The awareness of societal expectations and the changing nature of relationships promotes a sombre perspective on fertility decisions, recognizing the influence of societal trends on personal choices:

" There are so many cultural lines that are difficult to change. You can't change the young people today to not choose a hook-up culture, and go over to a relationship culture. There are big lines that are difficult to change. But I see it as a negative thing, really. And I would also like for people to have more children, and more permanent relationships, so to speak."

The individual expresses a nuanced perspective on the declining population and its potential impact on society. He considered the broader economic and societal implications of declining birth rates.

Linked to this was also his perspective of the welfare state being rolled back in Norway, which seemed to him as tendencies that children of the future would need sharper elbows in a less socialized, and more capitalistic state. When asked about which conditions could help him reconsider having children, he answered:

” If I had been in a larger left-oriented politics, and the whole population had agreed to take care of our society, it would have helped me to dare to give birth to a child. [...] Because then I know that if I'm gone, that my child will be taken care of anyway.”

His concern for the societal shifts and the potential realities for future generations shows a *humanistic* approach, where the well-being of future children is a significant factor in his decision, as is prevalent in many of his aspects. However, the lack of guarantees of an everlasting relationship gives implications of also affecting the decision of having children, again under the context of being asked about conditions for reconsideration. The respondent acknowledges his inability to guarantee a stable potential family environment, recognising that if he were to consider to have a child, the decision to have children should be made in the context of a secure relationship:

” And I really like the relationship I'm in now, but if I had been in a relationship where I had felt complete stability, complete security, that I had been... secure both in myself, and that our relationship would also last in life. [...] At the same time, I can't guarantee that I will be in that relationship for the rest of my life. And that makes it difficult for me to make a choice for the child.”

Fluidity

The interviewee notes a disconnect between his awareness of global progress and personal fears and anxieties about the state of the world, expressing a sense of unease. He linked this unease of how the world may develop with his own concerns about his consistency as a potential parent.

” It's like a general fear, perhaps, that is about the environment, insecurity in the world, war. But not just external things, but also things about yourself, who you are as a person. Could I become a good parent? And not just can I be a good parent, but can I be stable for a long period? So I have a mixed fear, from external factors, about how it will be to be a human being in the world for the next 100 years.”

Despite this acknowledgement it was perceived that to him, objectively, the world is improving. *”I know that the world is moving forward, and people are getting better. But I don't feel that way. Probably because of the news we consume.”*

The interview ends with a reminder that their reasons for not having children may continue to evolve, emphasizing the importance of personal autonomy and the fluid nature of the decision. As best said by the respondent: "my reason [for staying childfree] this week, may be another the next. [...] But as long as I consistently over time reason against having children, I will remain sure".

The respondent was not alien to the idea of freezing reproductive cells to be on the safe side, if things were to change in the future: "I've always thought that it's something that's smart to do. Because you don't lose anything. And you have everything to gain if you decide to change."

However, the trust (or lack thereof) in his own parenting abilities/instinct and the worrying signs of the country and the world remain firm in his decision, moving beyond simple biological imperatives. This reflects a nuanced understanding of *biologism* in the context of contemporary societal challenges.

In summary, this interview offers an exploration of the individual's decision to be childfree, the factors and joy which influences that decision, and their evolving motivations. It provides insight into the complexities of personal choices and the interplay between individual autonomy, societal expectations, and changing circumstances.

Respondent #4, female, late-twenties

The interviewee's primary reason for not wanting children centres around a deep sense of bodily autonomy. She expresses a clear desire to maintain control over her physical body and experiences, preserving her right to choose what happens to her body and life. This seems to have been prevalent throughout the respondents' life. During she does show a heightened sense of competence, and in the finishing paragraph, she states: "I have experienced most of the milestones in my life", as a stance on why she does not yearn for children. Her statement about experiencing life's milestones might reflect a sense of fulfilment and completeness in her current life, challenging the notion that motherhood is a necessary or defining milestone for women.

Societal pressure and familial sorrow

The respondent however expresses a sense of frustration and invalidation when her decision to remain childfree is met with disbelief or dismissal, expressing a need for her autonomy to be acknowledged:

”Many people do not believe that when I say I do not want children. And it may well be that it changes. But it's like sabotaging my reality right now, as it is now. When they tell me that I should change my mind in the future. And I just do not think that's okay.”

When others implies that she might change her mind in the future, it diminishes her current reality and choice, treating it as a phase rather than a valid, well-considered decision. This experience is portrayed as emotionally taxing for the respondent, as it not only challenges her autonomy but also potentially leads to a sense of isolation or misunderstanding. It reflects a broader societal challenge where non-traditional choices, such as opting to be childfree, are often met with scepticism or viewed as temporary. This conundrum is restated in the context of familial expectations and the perception of selfishness. As the interview swerved towards the expectation of close family members, the respondent revealed that her choice caused sadness for her mother in particular:

” I don't think she respects my decision right now. But I also think she has a hope that I will have a child at some point. And I also think she believes that I will probably change my mind in the future. And of course, who knows? I would always say that. But I think it's sad that she has to go through this because of me or my choice. Or because of something that doesn't exist.”

This invalidation of her autonomy leads also to guilt and an emotional burden for the respondent, who is not met with sufficient understanding, which strains her relatedness, as she is often reminded of her life path that diverges from the common reproductive norm. These norms may of course have shifted beyond what her family members have been able to register, holding a deeper root in traditional family norms. News of pregnancies and newborns in their network is often two-sided, and exacerbating these feelings of sadness for the respondent's choice:

” I can feel on my mother that when she hears others from our network are pregnant or have had children, then I can see she has a sad face. [...] And that's because she also has a wish that I should have my own child.”

The interviewee acknowledges the societal and familial pressures surrounding the idea of having children, and picture societal dynamics that make her choice challenging, such as the prevailing cultural narratives around womanhood and motherhood. It might be that childfree individual

choices are prone to face the same challenges, as the societal shift and acceptance lags behind, especially in terms of intergenerational differences on the perspectives of family and reproduction. However, this recognition highlights the extrinsic motivations present in her environment, contrasting sharply with her personal values and desires. Her decision to remain childfree in the face of these external pressures paints the respondent with a strong resolve.

Her thoughts on gender roles and societal expectations are candidly expressed when she discusses the prominence of female expectations in the subject of childbearing. This reflection indicates a critical awareness of how gender dynamics influence personal choices and societal norms. When asked what condition could make her reconsider, she shared:

” If in three or five years my hormones go crazy as a woman [I would reconsider]. But we are also projected to think in that way. The fact that I think that my hormones can change my decision, is because... The society has made us think like women.”

This is an instance of expected biologism coupled with extrinsic pressure on a societal scale, which calls for women to embrace motherhood, as the respondent herself admits to perceive with a pinch of determinism. Not just as a biological gender, but as a constructed gender, where motherhood is the evolvement of womanhood (Harrison, 2019: 23, Fjell 2008). Her awareness of the impact of societal narratives on her personal choices and identity highlights some of the complexities women face when navigating the intersection of biology, gender roles, and societal expectations.

Well-being in status quo

Another significant aspect of her decision is the current absence of intrinsic motivation for motherhood. She does not experience this internal drive or desire for motherhood, and most significantly in the respondents’ narrative; nor does she wish to leave her current state of being and undergo the changes that comes along with pregnancy. It does not at first glance give the impression of the respondent being under the condition of tokophobia, or the fear of being pregnant (which turned up in answers in the survey), but certainly about being in control over her own life and body.

” The biggest reason for me is that I don't want my body to change. I don't feel like I want to experience being pregnant. I haven't experienced the motherhood feeling that many women feel. [...] I don't want to change my life.”

Her further reflections on her parents' challenges and her concerns about global issues like climate change and the prevalence of war that occurs throughout the world indicate a thoughtful consideration of her own psychological needs and well-being. As stated,

"I don't feel like the world is safe right now. I don't want to experience climate change. There is so much injustice in the world. I don't want to experience a lot of wars. I don't want to bring a child to war."

These are clear examples of underlying worries that limits her possibilities for reproduction, as the list goes on. It does show a form of *humanism*, when indicating that they want to see a form of sustainable development before considering alternatives, as well as being humble about disregarding any future *biological instinct* that might interfere in her current narrative and logic. This shows her awareness of global challenges and her desire to make choices that are not only personally meaningful but also considerate of the wider world.

Her sense of humanism reverberates through her quote: *"I just feel like, if my child should be safe, then the 10 other children should also be safe, who live somewhere in Congo or something. Now there are also a lot of problems there, I've heard."*, which shows an updated worldview (due to the ongoing humanitarian crisis there as of late 2023) as the respondent echoes calls for a just and altruistic worldwide society. Yet this finding can be seen in the context of Savelieva et al (2023) who studied fertility decline in Finland and its connection to female frequent social media users influences their childbearing decisions, perhaps fuelling the perception of a troubling world.

Coming of age

The respondent also acknowledged the perception of a certain maturity needed as a parent, as experienced in her own example: *"I have been loved by my parents. We have gotten everything we needed. Even though my parents didn't have that much money, I don't think they were ready to become parents."* This shows a nuanced understanding of what constitutes parental readiness, and her consideration of her parents' experiences is likely to inform her own views on the responsibilities and readiness required for parenthood. However, her statement *"I don't want to take responsibility for another person"* underscore a self-determined choice grounded in personal values and a clear understanding of her own wants and needs. This autonomy is not only about making choices that are free from external coercion but also about making decisions that are congruent with one's own identity and values.

Her competence and capabilities are what comes to the surface in this connection, as the respondent states when asked about the sheer benefits of remaining in a status quo, reproductive-wise:

”That I don't change myself in that way. That I don't have to take responsibility. And that I am more individual. [...] That it can be beautiful to discover new things about yourself.”

It does exemplify her value in the opportunity for personal growth and self-discovery, not just having a set of functioning's as per capabilities approach (Nussbaum, 2000: 78-80), but also having the freedom to pursue goals and valuable activities. Having the ability to reflect one's personal values and identity through her understanding of her capabilities is crucial for shaping the life that is in accordance with her aspirations. These statements are not to be interpreted as shortcomings, when facing a discourse that is often pronatal, but a deep, personal understanding of the capabilities and desires of the respondent.

In summary, the interviewee's decision to remain childfree is deeply rooted in her desire for personal autonomy and is influenced by a lack of intrinsic motivation for motherhood and personal experiences. This decision is made within the context of societal expectations and her understanding of her capabilities and global responsibilities. Her choice exemplifies the role of autonomy, intrinsic motivation, and perceived competence in shaping personal decisions. The interviewee's statements paint a picture of an individual making a thoughtful, self-determined decision about being childfree. Her words reflect a deep understanding of her own desires, capabilities, and the wider societal and environmental context in which she makes this life choice. This decision is not merely a personal preference but a manifestation of her exercising agency amidst external pressure, autonomy, and a commitment to her own well-being and development.

Gathering responses

Autonomy and Interpretation

All interviewees highly value autonomy and the freedom to make choices in their lives. Their decision to remain childfree is not just about the absence of parenthood; it seems to be deeply embedded in the interpretation and the meaning it holds within their personal narratives. This autonomy empowers them to live on their terms, free from the responsibilities and constraints of parenthood. This seems to be the cornerstone of their motivation.

The interviews also revealed that autonomy isn't just about making choices but about interpreting their childfree lifestyle as a meaningful and personal choice. The Capabilities Approach emphasizes the importance of having the freedom to make choices based on one's values and desires, rather than societal norms or expectations (Sen, 1999: 17-18). The interviewees' decision to live life on their own terms, despite societal pressures, is a manifestation of exercising this freedom and finding solace in it.

While relatedness and competence play significant roles in their lives, autonomy, as empowered by their ability to make choices aligned with their own desires, seems to be the most prominent and influential factor driving their decision to remain childfree. It provides them with the foundation they need to lead fulfilling, meaningful lives.

Competence and Relatedness

They each experience a sense of competence and mastery in managing their lives, according to their own values and priorities. Competence, from the Self-Determination Theory perspective, comes from making choices that lead to happiness and well-being. Competence is also achieved through various aspects of life, such as pursuing passions, achieving personal goals, and living in alignment with individual values. This reflects a shared pursuit of personal fulfilment.

The importance of competence, as understood through the Capabilities Approach, is reflected in how the interviewees manage their lives in alignment with their values and priorities. This competence is not just about the ability to live without children but encompasses their broader life achievements. Their sense of competence and mastery in managing their lives according to their own standards is a critical factor in their overall well-being.

Relatedness is a shared theme among the interviewees. These relationships, whether with partners, friends, or chosen family members, contribute significantly to their sense of belonging and emotional fulfilment. The ability to nurture and maintain these relationships while leading a childfree lifestyle demonstrates their capacity to achieve well-being in ways that are important to them. From the Self-Determination Theory perspective, maintaining fulfilling relationships with partners, friends, and chosen family members is an important part of their lives. These relationships contribute to their sense of meaning. Respondent #1 and #2 seemed well aware of their tactics of enhancing this aspect, and finding solace within family and friends. It was also important for all

respondent's to be able to discuss the topic with others, just to get different perspectives.

Common Themes

All had an environmental aspect of their choice, but it was not communicated as the propeller of their choice. It came along later on in the interviews usually, as an aspect that they largely deemed as a positive outcome, seeing that their freedom as non-parents weighed the most on their choice. Their autonomy and sense of liberalism seemed to be the respondent's main reason for their choice.

Everyone would opt for freezing reproductive material if costs were not an issue for a later point, should it ever be an alternative, as well as freezing more youthful samples of their genes, rather now than in a couple of years. This was closely linked to not being entirely anchored in being childfree, should it be their partners' innermost desire: respondent #1 and #3 showed willingness to compromise on having children, if it meant staying with their current partner.

The respondents all exhibit a feeling of experiencing invalidation or stigmatization from their social sphere which lines up with Cools and Strøm (2020) findings that an equal number of men and women experiences such pressure from family and friends. The inherent, perceived lack of 'meaning' with being childfree is identified, as respondents often feel misunderstood. The females in particular feel a strong sense of societal pressure, which is more usual for them to meet than men (Cools and Strøm, 2020: 33). This indicates an uneven gendered external pressure.

All respondent's identified as childfree ahead of being childless. Throughout the interviews, each respondent was asked about how they interpreted the word 'childfree', had their explanation of it without input on its consensus, and would thereafter categorize themselves as such. Every respondent expressed that this choice aligns with their personal desires and life goals, emphasizing the importance of having the agency to make this decision for themselves. There is also a shared theme among the interviewees that the sense of competence they derive from their childfree lifestyle, managing their lives according to their values and priorities, is of an utmost importance.

Maintaining fulfilling relationships is a significant aspect of the lives of these interviewees. They all emphasize the importance of relationships with partners, friends, and chosen family members.

These connections provide them with emotional support, happiness, and a sense of belonging. The respondent's express that their relationships are an essential part of their childfree lives, and having a sense of agreement upon the topic.

Divergences

While all interviewees value autonomy, the specific aspects of their lives where autonomy is significant may differ. For some, autonomy is primarily related to the freedom to make choices, including the choice to be childfree, and the straying clear of the responsibility a child would bring in expectations of 'harder times'. Others may focus on personal freedom in terms of lifestyle choices and living life according to their own terms.

The respondents have varying perspectives on parenthood, relationships, and their implications. For instance, some see being childfree as a joint decision within a partnership, while others view it more as a personal choice independent of relationship dynamics, however adaptable.

Although all interviewees experience competence in managing their lives, the sources of this competence vary. Some find competence through pursuing their passions and personal goals, while others derive it from living in alignment with their deeply held values, such as focusing and spending energy on what they want. The specifics of how they express this sense of competence are unique to each individual. Respondent #3 suggested that his choice could be interpreted as egoism: *"I enjoy my life very much, and I just want to keep doing it, to put it mildly. And to have a child just requires several years of effort."*

It was clear that this line of reasoning seemed bittersweet to the respondent: content with their choice, but apologetic in how it could be viewed for others. Sources of competence are diverse, reflecting the individual's interpretation of personal fulfilment. It does however pose as an afterthought, that to be deemed irrational can remain dormant as a worry, which shows that not all respondents are free from extrinsic notions, especially on how they are viewed when communicating their reasoning. Some might be more ashamed to state their innermost thoughts and motivations of how and why they lead their lives as a childfree, as the meaning of what you 'do' is not necessarily obvious when you do not have a life project through raising another person. Although none of the respondent's communicated experiences of stigmatization due to being childfree, it is portrayed as a prevalent reality in literature from Morison et al., (2016) and Harrison (2019). This form of shame, that might be for some an unescapable form of extrinsic pressure or projection of pronatalism, could be a well-suited topic for further research.

Relatedness:

The nature of relatedness differs among the interviewees. While they all highlight the significance of relationships, the specific relationships that hold the most importance can vary. Some place more emphasis on their relationships with their partner, while others emphasize their friendships and chosen family members as the primary sources of relatedness and support through our interviews. One respondent were curious about the other respondent's arguments, to see how they themselves could be relatable, and relate to the reasons of their choice.

In summary, these childfree individuals share common themes of autonomy, competence, and relatedness in their decision to remain childfree. However, the nuances in how they experience and prioritize these themes reflect their unique perspectives and life experiences, making each interviewee's journey to a childfree lifestyle distinct. There are many factors in motion between their self-determination, the interpretation of their childfree choices within their personal narratives, and the sources of competence and relatedness in their lives. Each interviewee's interpretation and experiences reflect a highly personalized approach to living a meaningful and childfree life - with an afterglow that indicates that, if they at some point want to reproduce, they will do so.

Analysis part two – Surveying reproductive attitudes

To supplement the in-depth qualitative exploration of individual narratives, we now transition to the quantitative realm. This chapter seeks to capture a broader perspective on reproductive attitudes within a larger population. As we delve into this analysis, we keep in mind the nuanced nature of reproductive choices and the complex interplay of personal, societal, and cultural factors that shape these decisions. In this survey, we stray away from the terms of being childless and childfree, as this survey aims to map intentions and attitudes, not identity.

This section will systematically present the findings from the survey, offering a statistical overview and a detailed examination of the responses. Through this comprehensive approach, the aim is to contribute an understanding of the dynamics surrounding reproductive attitudes, reflecting both individual choices and collective norms within the contemporary societal framework.

Descriptive statistics

The output derived from the responses of the online survey garnered an ample participation of 291 participants (N=291). The initial step in quantitatively summarizing and organizing the dataset will provide a snapshot of the reproductive attitudes among the sample. It will assist in contextualizing the qualitative findings within the broader patterns observed in the survey data.

Firstly, the respondents were asked the question: “How do you relate to people who does not want children?”. This was to take the temperature on how Norwegians in general view people who refrain from having children.

The respondents show from this quite an openness in their relation to the group in question: 52% stated that they perceived themselves as understanding to those who did not want children, while 23% were positive. A very small segment (1%) show a disregard of this group in that they want to distance themselves, and 23% of the respondents exhibits a neutral stance. These findings suggest a general acceptance between the respondents towards Norwegians abstaining from reproduction, with a noteworthy majority expressing positive or understanding attitudes.

Intention of respondents

Next up was the question that check into the subjects own reproductive stance, in the question of “Do you want children?”. Three of the categories were related to intention, while the fourth naturally gave the option of whether the respondent already had children. The respondents were divided as following: 20% wanted to have children in the future, 14% were undecided and 11% did not want children. The majority of the respondents (55%) already had children.

This distribution offers an interesting view of the reproductive landscape of the respondents, with a significant portion of the population already experiencing parenthood, while others are either hoping for, undecided or against the idea of having children. These categories will be cross-tabulated in the section below.

Openness

The question “How openly do you feel the topic can be discussed?” was mainly to inquire about the respondents' comfort level in discussing the topic of having children. A substantial majority believed that the subject of having children or not should be open for discussion. 4% said that this was not a topic to talk in the open about, 15% showed indifference, while the majority, 71% stated that it is a topic that should be possible to discuss. The latter 10% of the respondents found it

important for them to discuss with others at times, showing a possibly more personal attachment to the topic.

The overwhelming majority supporting open discussion on the topic indicates a societal climate conducive to free expression of reproductive choices and views. This openness is crucial for fostering understanding and respect for diverse perspectives on childbearing.

Following this question came a multiple-choice question that asked about what mattered the most for the respondents' reproductive attitudes. For the sake of the analysis, this survey design are bound to be best contextually understood by the use of categorical filters based on age demographics and family formation intentionality, which will be shown in the cross-tabulation section.

Pressure and duty

Peering into external pressure and societal expectations upon reproduction, the question lined up was one that asked whether the respondents experienced that reproduction is a duty. This aspect is particularly important in assessing the societal pressures and normative expectations surrounding childbearing. The responses to this question revealed a noticeable minority, 15% of the respondents, that feel that having children is a duty, as opposed to the remaining majority. This response of perceived duty of reproduction could be indicative of traditional or cultural influences that view reproduction as an essential part of life's journey. The belief in reproduction as a duty underscores the external pressures individuals might face, influencing their personal decisions regarding childbearing.

On the other hand, a significant majority (85%) do not perceive having children as a duty. This finding reflects a more modern or individualistic approach to reproduction, where personal choice and individual preferences take precedence over societal expectations or traditional norms. This question's responses highlight the ongoing tension between traditional expectations and modern individualistic values in the context of reproductive choices.

Lastly for the descriptive statistics, we have the age demographic. The age brackets are done in 5-year groupings between age 26-45, witnessing 49% of the respondents aging between 26-35. This is a critical period where many are likely to make significant decisions about starting a family (SSB, 2023) or choosing to remain childfree. One third of the respondents are from the bracket 46+. Those above 46 are not expected to reproduce further (Sobotka, 2018), having laid their fecund years largely behind them, offering a retrospective view on their reproductive decisions and impacts over a longer period.

The subsequent analysis will delve into cross-tabulating these responses, seeking correlations and deeper understanding within the data.

Cross-Tabulation

Cross-tabulation is a valuable statistical tool used in quantitative analysis to examine the relationships between categorical variables (Bryman, 2012: 335). In the context of this survey on reproductive attitudes, we can utilize cross-tabulation to dissect the attitudes of respondents based on their intentions and perspectives regarding their reproductive choice, as well as others. This method will enable us to observe how different groups within our sample — differentiated by factors such as age, gender, and current parental status — align with specific attitudes towards having children.

Intentionality Categories: The responses will be divided into distinct categories based on the interviewees' intentions regarding reproduction. These categories will include and be numbered as 'Undecided' (C1), 'Wants to have children in the future' (C2), 'Have children' (C3) and 'Does not want children' (C4), as seen below:

What matters the most for your decision?

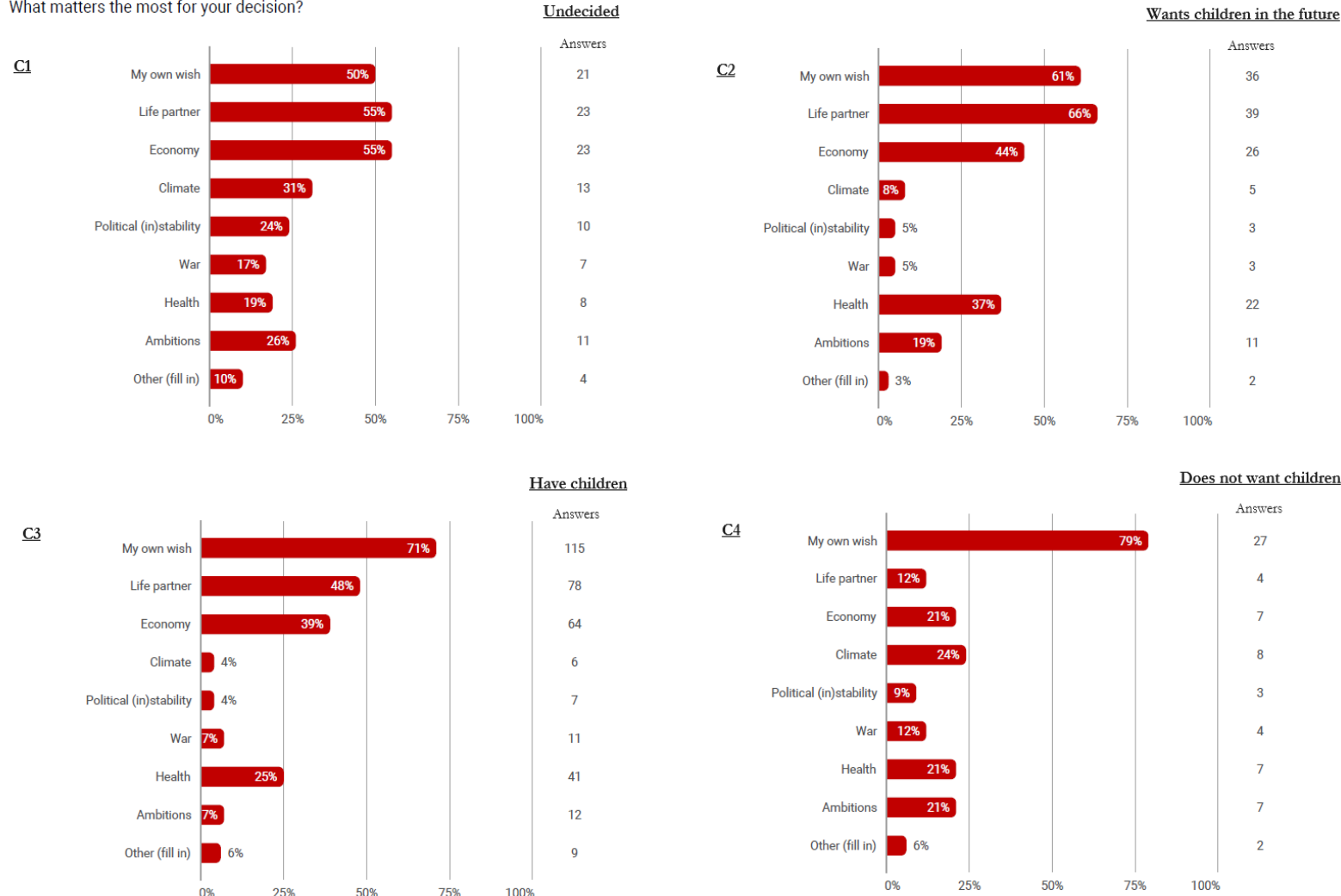


Figure 3 – SurveyXact – Reasons for reproductive choice

When given this question, *the respondents were given the option to tick of up to three different reasons* that they felt impacted their reproductive choice the most. The percentages here indicate the percentage of how many respondents in each category chose the different reasons among their (up to) three options. When we heed the frequency distribution of the various categories, we observe that the respondents own wish in total gathered the most ticks in total. This can be interpreted within the framework of Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017), as the core concepts can be applied to understand why individuals prioritize personal desire in their decision-making about having children.

Autonomy: The frequency of “My own wish” across categories indicates that respondents value the freedom to choose their paths in life, including their reproductive decisions, based on their personal desires and values. Having a secure economic outlook might heighten this sense of autonomy, as economic freedom provides capabilities to pursue one’s values (Sen, 1999: 20). Ambitions can also elevate the sense of self-determination, as we have a spectre in terms of capabilities and goals that we can reach for.

Competence: For those who choose according to their own desire could reflect a sense of competence in their ability to understand what they need and want in their lives, which also relates to ambition. This also includes making informed decisions about parenthood, which aligns with their perceived abilities (which has been emerged as a topic during the interviews), as well as resources and life goals. While the three categories C1, C2 and C3 tend to list “Life partner” and “Economy” as important indicators of their choices may reflect how individuals gauge their competence in different aspects of life. This can include financial stability and a secure relationship, in relation to the decision about having children.

Relatedness is less directly highlighted by the respondent’s own wish as a denominator for their reproductive choice, yet it still plays a role. For instance, those who prioritize a life partner alongside their own wish can be interpreted as integrating their relational considerations into their autonomous decision-making process. Political stability can also heighten this aspect, as more

inclusive or ambitious politics (depending on political affiliation) can make people to relate more to their society, standing behind its' course.

Notable findings

We find that there are varying degrees of self-determination through the autonomy of the respondents, yet it remains an important factor to every category of respondents (mean = 65.25%). The respondents 'own wish' has the lowest frequency for C1, indicating that other circumstances are just as important reasons for whether they choose to reproduce. Amongst this group, we find the most spread and even frequencies of answers, seeing that life partner and economy takes the lead as the denominator. C1 have the highest frequency of importance put in economy, indicating that this group is more prone to make reproductive choices based on economic outlook.

However, reasons that may have a root in external worries, such as climate (31%), political (in)stability (24%) and war (17%) is notably higher in C1 than the other three categories, which suggest that those who are undecided are more prone to heed occurrences beyond their control. This could also be a lower sense of competence in their abilities to provide for children through hardship, or even in their ability to select a narrative with a sufficient positive outlook for family formation, as proposed by Savelieva et al (2023) in their study that links lowered fertility with significant social media exposure.

Family formation

The category of respondents who wants children are the ones who most often answers that their life partner is the most important aspect, yet many also heed the economic considerations of family formation. This lines up with Cools and Strøm (2020) study, that found that having a set relationship and a secure economy meant the most to Norwegian adults in this relation. When compared to those who are undecided, it is clear that this group mostly does not take notice of external worries, and focus on what is within their competency.

The categories C2 and C3, seem similar in many aspects, weighing autonomy, life partner and economy as the top three, with health close behind. The frequency of health as an indicator could be interpreted as that those who reproduce take a stronger interest in healthy activities and sustenance, which is an important aspect to more than one third of this category. It could be to enjoy mobility and longevity as parents, or assessing their ability to effectively engage in parenting.

C3 however has a lowered frequency of importance put in a life partner, which could be affected by the high rate of separation for parents in Norway, as this group retrospectively look back at their reproductive denominators.

Resolve without children

Dwarfing the other nominal values, those who does not want children (C4) have their own wish as the most frequent answer. It indicates a strong desire for self-governance and making choices that resonate with personal values and beliefs. This high percentage reflects a significant trend towards prioritizing personal autonomy in the decision not to have children. 69 answers for 34 respondents in this category gives in total roughly two nominal values chosen (out of three) on average, meaning that the most common combination was rooted in autonomy and another value. The most common pairing with autonomy is climate (24%) and economy, health and ambitions (all 21%).

Environmental concerns play a noteworthy role. This aligns with integrated regulation, where individuals incorporate broader environmental values into their personal identity and life choices. The decision not to have children, influenced by concerns about climate change, can be interpreted as a deep sense of responsibility towards the planet and future generations, possibly exhibiting pro-environmental behaviour (PEB). Economic considerations are crucial for many. suggests that individuals are weighing their financial stability and resources, and how these would be impacted by parenthood, thereby affecting their sense of competence and self-efficacy.

Health concerns, both physical and mental, are equally important. This also relates to competence in SDT, as individuals may assess their health status and its implications for their ability to effectively engage in parenting. It may also entail the health concerns related to having children or giving birth, which is evident in interviews and in the later qualitative insights of this survey. Personal ambitions and goals, which could be career-oriented or other life pursuits, reflect a self-directed path. This is another aspect of autonomy, where personal aspirations take precedence over societal norms or expectations. The influence of a life partner in this decision, although lower in percentage, still indicates the importance of relatedness in SDT. This suggests that the quality and dynamics of a relationship can impact the decision-making process about having children, as witnessed by the degree of compromise in some of the interviewees.

Concerns about global stability and conflict, although less frequently cited, reflect a broader awareness and apprehension about bringing children into a world perceived as unstable or dangerous. This can be linked to both competence (assessing one's ability to provide a stable environment) and a broader, integrated concern for global issues. Notably, these concerns are more often stated in the category of respondents who are undecided (C1) than C4. This evokes the hypotheses that those who are undecided are delaying reproduction in search of suitable family formation conditions.

Demographic and categorical segmentation

When cross-tabulating for the implications upon the survey by different age groups, we get another perspective upon their answers. The table below shows the data gathered from the survey (N=291) and illustrate how frequencies differ according to the respective age groups. Below the categories, we have the percentages of whether respondents feel that reproduction is expected (Duty), whether they are understanding or positive towards those who does not want children (Relate) and whether they find the topic of reproduction as a topic that is important to discuss, or at least should be able to foster discussion (Openness).

	Age groups					
	18-25 (N=17)	26-30 (N=73)	31-35 (N=72)	36-40 (N=20)	41-45 (N=14)	46+ (N=95)
C1 - Undecided	21%	23%	24%	10%	7%	0%
C2 - Wants children	53%	40%	23%	10%	0%	1%
C3 - Have children	5%	23%	34%	65%	86%	97%
C4 - Does not want children	21%	14%	19%	15%	7%	2%
Duty	39%	25%	15%	10%	13%	6%
Relate	66%	79%	81%	75%	71%	71%
Openness	79%	86%	84%	80%	80%	76%

Table A1 – Age and categorical patterns

Following the categories, C1 shows more determination on landing on their reproductive choice as they age, with the largest drop between unrealised and realised fertility (Philipov, 2009: 356) happening between age 31-35 and 36-40. C2 have the largest frequency in the youngest group, showing that those that are least likely to have children are the most frequently determined on getting them, as well as a correlation between wanting children and age. This category evidently phases out as reproductive paths are carved out with age, which could be the eventual outcome and norm. C3 grows along this path, showing that only 34% of the respondents are parents by age 35, as opposed to 97% of the respondents above 46.

C4 has a quite even prevalence as a significant minority, yet it is rare for the respondents who are above 41 years. This can indicate the willingness for people to be fluid in their reproductive choices, or it could illuminate changes in reproductive norms as suggested by Fluchtman and Gustafsson (2023), as has been witnessed in neighbouring Finland (Rotkirch et al., 2017). This table is naturally not linear progression, merely a snapshot of the population that participated. Fertility cohorts will give us the definitive answer in reproductive norms in due time.

The belief that reproduction is a duty declines with age. The highest percentage is seen in the youngest group (18-25 years), possibly reflecting more traditional or societal expectations among younger people, or less time exposed to alternative understandings of reproduction. This perception decreases significantly in older age groups, indicating a shift towards seeing reproduction as an intrinsic choice rather than an external obligation. It might be that this group is also less likely to feel any external pressure, which shapes their perception of societal norms. The decreasing belief in a sense of duty over the ages might also be expectations which are resolved within the respondents' social sphere, as well as disregarding societal pressure over time.

Relation to Childfree Individuals

Across all age groups, the majority relate positively or are understanding towards individuals who choose not to have children. This consistent trend across ages reflects a broad societal acceptance and understanding of the choice to be childless in Norway. However, a smaller degree of relation is found in the youngest group, which could be a lack of exposure to the group in question, or the childless discourse.

All age groups show a strong openness to discussing reproductive topics, indicating a healthy societal environment where such discussions are neither perceived as taboo, nor restricted. The slight decrease in openness in older age groups might reflect established views or lesser engagement with the topic. It could also be not to disturb the reproductive choices of children of their own.

The survey results map a clear trajectory of reproductive attitudes across different life stages in Norway. Younger individuals exhibit exploration and openness to various paths, while older groups show settled choices and acceptance of diverse life decisions. The overall societal attitude towards reproductive choices, as reflected in the survey, leans towards understanding, acceptance, and an open dialogue, crucial for a progressive and inclusive society.

Qualitative insights

The survey gave two opportunities for respondents to fill out answers of their own. This gave valuable qualitative additions to the data. On the question from Figure A1 “What matters most for your decision?”, 17 answers (6%) came from respondents who felt the need to add a reason of their own. These were mostly short answers with a diverse spectrum of reasons. These were related to more negative sentiments, such as uncertain future, mental health, societal apathy, as well as more capability-oriented answers such as career (which were intended to be covered under the category ‘Ambition’), time to pursue valuable activities, love, religion and legacy.

The last question was a free-text that gave the respondents’ the opportunity to add anything to the topic. This garnered involvement through several long answers. Out of 46 free-text answers, 20 of these encompass the notion of how it should be a self-determined and open choice, or expressing understanding with those who chooses not to have children. There is one insight from a respondent that says that they cannot envision a life without their kid(s), yet convey a resonance for those who choose not to have children, and view them as having “*an enormous degree of self-sacrifice*”. This might be an alternative positive outlook on childfree individuals. Whereas another respondent stated:

“It should be up to the individual whether they want children or not. Most have thought through the situation and found out what is best for themselves and an eventual future child.”

This can be seen as a call for less external pressure regarding others reproductive choices, and building under intrinsic motivation. Another respondent underlines this challenge:

“There is a lack of understanding in society that some don’t want or can’t have children. Those who don’t want are not “allowed” to talk about it, and many will try to persuade them”, acknowledging a difficult climate for those without children. Others calls the discourse ‘taboo’, yet ‘important to have an open discussion about’, while one respondent thoughtfully adds:

“It should be room to discuss [it] in the open, but on a higher level – the society needs to mature for its’ future, but it should not be forgotten that the conditions for having children must be aligned”.

This suggests that the respondent calls for a society that focuses on freedom as development (Sen, 1999: 37): accommodating people’s capabilities, fostering respect for individual decision-making. Capabilities are reiterated in another sentiment that points out the importance of everyone getting a life that they *“feel they want and can manage”*. A handful responses talks about how the climate of the discourse have soothed in later years, stating that they experience it as more socially acceptable to make a self-informed choice regarding reproduction than before, pointing to that it might have been *“more societal expectation”* earlier.

However, one parent states, in relation to getting unwanted questions about when their ‘next’ child arrives: *“the norm is to have two children before people stop invading your privacy”*, indicating the pressure faced by those who already have children. Others feel expectation through religion and culture, some place meaning in their heritage: a respondent derive meaning by continue their genes and *“millions of years of evolution”*. A couple of respondents have *“always had a big wish to become a mother”*, and another recalls a joyful upbringing in a large family stating that *“I want the same for my future, just a parent”*.

Parental acknowledgement

Some responses state that that reproduction is a gift, while another respondent who acknowledge this same notion, would have thought twice if they knew all the worries and sorrows that are related to being a parent: *“the grief of losing a child is not worth the happiness you feel for having it. And a life without children is as much lived as one without!”*. The sentiment of knowing beforehand the challenges related to having children are echoed by a couple of respondents, who have met challenges *“health wise, economically and [lack of] support from the family”*, with one stating:

“After I had children, I understood better that it’s not for everyone, and why someone don’t choose it. I have two children, economy is a big reason for me not having more”.

Closing remarks

Open-ended survey responses provided qualitative insights, highlighting themes of autonomy, societal acceptance, alternative parenting methods, and concerns about global stability. Responses underscored the importance of respecting individual decisions, whether to embrace or forego parenthood, reflecting a societal shift towards greater acceptance of diverse reproductive choices. Respondents also reflected on the pressure and expectations they face, both from society in general and within specific contexts like family and religion. Personal perspectives about the challenges of parenthood, including health and economic concerns, and the deep emotional impact of raising children, shows a vulnerable side of parenting. The nuances in these responses offer a richer understanding of the societal context surrounding reproductive attitudes, complementing the statistical data with personal perspectives and experiences.

In summary, this analysis of the survey data, combined with its’ qualitative insights, presents a nuanced view of reproductive attitudes in Norway. It highlights trends, correlations, and themes, such as the value of autonomy, societal acceptance of diverse reproductive choices, and the evolving nature of family planning decisions across different life stages. This approach gives a glimpse of the many dynamics of reproductive attitudes, reflecting both individual preferences and societal norms in contemporary Norway, yet should be seen within the limitations of conventional sampling. These sentiments are brought with us as we tie the knot between the mixed methods and weave it into the cloth of the discussion.

Discussion

While we set off on this chapter of the thesis, it is important to bring with us the synthesized qualitative and quantitative analyses back to the context of the guiding research questions which we return to for the last time:

How do Norwegian adults balance societal and personal factors in their decision to be without children?

The sub-question more specifically asking: *Which societal factors are presented as important for the choice to be childfree?*

The discussion critically examines how individual experiences and societal perceptions, as illuminated by qualitative insights, align with the trends observed in the survey data across different demographic groups. This analysis integrates the perspectives from these diverse data sources, offering a comprehensive understanding of the childfree phenomenon in Norway. Insights from my interview with associate professor Nakkerud will also appear as an analytical backdrop from time to time, cited with (int.) behind.

Personal Freedom and Autonomy

As prominently founded within this thesis, the focus of personal freedom, autonomy, and self-development grows apparent throughout the interviews. This underlines that personal aspirations most often outweigh societal expectations in the decision to be childfree. Self-Determination Theory (SDT) emphasizes autonomy as a fundamental psychological need, which the theory posits must be satisfied for development, psychological interest and wellness to be sustained (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 10).

The survey data reinforces this, showing that a significant majority of respondents prioritize personal choice, particularly among those who do not want children. This distinct preference for autonomy suggests a more pronounced self-determination in reproductive choices among childfree individuals. The qualitative data from interviews further illustrate this individualistic approach, as respondents express a desire to retain their identity and autonomy, viewing the childfree choice as an opportunity for self-discovery and personal growth.

The choice of being childfree in Norway were described by those interviewed an intersection of diverse factors, but all expressed that they *did not want their life to change*. The respondents had

adopted a relaxed way of describing their narratives, yet reported mixed experiences with family and peers. Many had been infantilized, hearing that they would reconsider when they were older, and would understand when they first had children of their own. These were narratives they rejected, and would not gamble on bringing a child to the world to find out.

However, all respondents were willing to compromise their childfree choice and consider reproduction if it were in alignment with their life partners' desires, or by being struck by the 'motherhood-feeling'. Every interviewed respondent were open to freeze their reproductive biomaterial, underlining this adaptability. One gendered nuance in this regard, was the childfree females having issues with the thought of being pregnant, of their bodies changing and of health impacts caused by the process. This invokes the idea of tokophobia, or the fear of being pregnant, which is suggested may have its' foundation in a pregnancy discourse about complications within their respective peer group.

Direction of society

Common themes in the respondents are reflective about the incentives to have children, with concerns related to whether it is safe to have children, or whether the Norwegian society seems desirable to them as a parent. What is unappealing to some of them as potential parents is the perceived social control from the state and others that comes with having children, highlighting the freedom from these parameters as a childfree individual. Some of the interviewees invoke the notion of a gradually less socialized society – one that cannot advocate for children to be taken care of when the respondents are gone. It is evident in two of the interviews, that they have heard the state calling for more children, but that it is perceived with an undertone of the social responsibility of reproduction, while at the same time hearing discourse about saving the environment.

This is the same dissonance that is identified in Norwegian national discourse by Kristensen (2020: 156-158). They respondents are employing the ideological dilemmas of *sustainable development* and *humanism* (Nakkerud, 2021: 11-13) in perceiving the environmental problems as real problems that are larger than the state, while not seeing the point in bringing a child of their own to a future that they believe might not favour children. They do not respond well to the individualisation of responsibility (Nakkerud, 2021: 16), hearing discourse that calls for their reproductive contribution to society, which these respondents connect to idea of irresponsible growth, for the sake of society.

Social pressure

My first analysis has shown through semi-structured interviews, that a societal pressure exists and is in a varying degree experienced by all respondents. One respondent was quite aware of children's symbolic value, and when asked about the advantages of having children, he responded: *"You don't have to think about what you do. Because the meaning of what you do is obvious."*

This quote is indicative about the pressure of being childfree and without a visual meaningful symbol, which might be a fitting description of the realities of the childfree, as well as telling of the subtle Norwegian pronatalism discourse (Nakkerud, int.). Moore and Geist-Martin (2013: 242-244) brings up the prominent pronatalist discourse that revolves around asking whether a human can find fulfilment without children, which can arguably be seen as tangible rewards (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 137), and an obvious meaning. However, when tangible rewards are used to induce people to attain them, it is used as a matter of control, and extrinsic motivation (ibid: 137). It is not necessarily ill-intentioned, but merely inherent in a society where having children is a norm, as a result of the evolutionary selection of behavioral modes (Sen, 1999: 261), making pronatalism a dominant discourse. However, the effect of extrinsic motivation is that it significantly undermines intrinsic motivation, and experiencing reproduction as a duty is testament to the existence of the norm. What our quantitative findings tells us, is that this conception appear to fade with age, indicating that the pronatalistic narrative loses its adolescent grip, as adult gains more experience and insight.

Extrinsic motivation can be seen as gendered in terms of reproduction, where males go more under the radar, and that particularly motherhood is a developmental milestone (Harrington, 2019: 24). Additionally, different degrees of experienced societal pressure is observed by Cools & Strøm (2020: 33) as more prevalent among females. This is viewed in the interviews, where the females have more detailed narratives of how experiences of reproductive pressure in society, as well as experiencing tension and sorrow due to parental expectations. The males do not give an indication of being challenged on their childfree choice as directly, and tie these challenges more to the perception of reputation, as stated by one male respondent:

"I think I would have gotten more status from having children. And that's both from family and colleagues. I think people would have thought better of me if I chose to have children than if I didn't choose to have children."

While Nussbaum's (2000: 78-80) framework focus on the freedom to achieve well-being in ways one values, well-being can also be asserted to be reliant on the ways others value your values, through one of Nussbaum's central human functional capability: affiliation. This encompasses "*to be able to imagine the situation of another and to have compassion for that situation*" (ibid: 79). The interviewees indicate that their intentions are misunderstood, and met with "*little positivity*".

Childfree individuals can be seen as nonconformist, cold, materialistic and selfish (Hintz and Tucker, 2023:5). The latter is reflected upon of one interviewee as a possible portrayal of himself to his peers, despite the survey findings of an apparent understanding of the childfree choice. To borrow Gadamer's term 'horizon' as the "range" of our capacity to understand, it is the formation we have achieved through our interpretive experience, both from formal education and life-experience (Theodore, 2021). It can be deemed simply as exposure, and the root of extrinsic pressure might be the lack of it. The goal could therefore be argued as expanding our horizon, merge with others, and illuminate the larger context of our horizon, to heighten the feeling of kin. Yet, horizons need social institutions to merge.

Societal factors

As my first analysis shows: being childfree is not to be inherently against children or caring in their lives, and talk about having an outlet through working as a teacher, or through family members with children, as well as notions of considering adoption or foster care. These unrecognized caring outlets could be a place to start when challenging established ways to think about population and human reproduction, and possibly think about new concepts and practices for what we see as kin outside biogenetics, as suggested by Clarke (2018: 2). This will ask for another type of horizon, yet a more real assessment of our current situation and reproductive attitudes which are bound to reform Norwegian society, is essential to construct its' concepts of inclusivity.

Seeing the hesitation for the interviewees to engage reproductively in a society that does not seem to build under concepts of inclusivity in the foreseeable future, might be a conundrum in terms of individuality, although in different connotations. Individuality in terms of freedom to pursue your own values, is not the individuality that separates us from those who are not seen as kin. While I am not arguing against having a unique semblance, strengthening and building social institutions that weaves kin across individualities, backgrounds and age under Nussbaum's (2000: 79) idea of affiliation as a central functional capability is paramount. Idealistic as it may sound, it might be an incentive that encourage more than economically centred initiatives for the childfree to partake in a

more aligned and genuine social responsibility: protecting, nourishing and developing social institutions that heightens the capability of affiliation.

Economy

Although three of the interviewees acknowledge economic aspects, the economic outlook and sense of ability to provide has little practical impact on their childfree choice. This finding is reflected in the second analysis' quantitative data (Figure 3), seeing that out of 34 childfree individuals, 7 reported that economy had an influence on their reproductive decision. For the other three categories, economy was an important denominator, ranging between 39 and 55 per cent, the latter concerning individuals who were undecided about their reproductive decision. This suggests that economic policies, which most Norwegian research on reproduction has been based upon (Cools and Strøm, 2020), has a certain reach within different reproductive attitudes. Kristensen (2020:158) criticizes policy-makers for assuming that Norwegians want more children and oversimplifying the issue by suggesting that only economic security is preventing this desire from being realized.

This comes to show the childfree as a neglected area of study, missing a piece of the demographic and reproductive picture. It might be due to fertility research and demographers traditionally having its ties to policymakers, which sees low fertility as a problem to solve, employed by the ideological dilemma of sustainable development in ensuring the continuation of the welfare state. Insinuating anything else is demanding for politicians to say (Nakkerud, int.). As evident from the first analysis, the interviews echoes that being childfree is not represented to a large degree, nor in a positive way within Norwegian media or society:

“At least not from the perspective of those who are childfree. Childlessness, I feel, is a narrative.”

Other concerns

There are more prominent reason that has its' place among the childfree interviewees is their connectivity to the negative developments in the world. In the interviews, they appear calm and optimistic, but as one respondent state:

“I just feel that my image of the world, probably because I care more and more about the world, is becoming more and more negative.”

This unease seems to be a complementary factor in the childfree decision for the interviewees, three of whom inhibit a stated fear of the future, one stating “*we have to adapt a lot.*” As seen in Figure 3 in our second analysis, climate, political (in)stability and war are all more even represented for the childfree, as well as the undecided, yet a rare implication on the categories who want and have children. Worries about the future and environmental issues are more pronounced among the general childless group than parents and those who wishes to have children, as highlighted in Cools and Strøm’s study (2020: 72) reflects similar dissonance. This suggests a link between reproductive attitudes and types of concerns: those who are childfree, or undecided may be influenced by external factors beyond their control, while individuals who desire or have children may focus on factors they can more directly manage, adding an important piece to the understanding of these attitudes. Further research will need to be able to map this more extensively for us to get a better perspective on the matter.

Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, there has been an endeavour to broaden my horizon for how various factor from the social and individual sphere weave itself into the decision-making process of the childfree. Not as a definitive moment, but a culmination over time that cements their intention continuously, for the time being.

Phenomenology has been a valuable lens to approach this topic and these individuals, by building understanding of their self-reflection and narratives. Through a mixed methods methodology, this approach allowed me to contextualize statistical data within the realm of human experience, making the results more comprehensible. The subsequent interpretation of the phenomena was conducted within the hermeneutic approach, which permitted an integration of a broader societal and historical factors when analysing the data from both methodologies.

We have had our framework within the Self-Determination Theory (Ryan and Deci, 2017) which can be useful in analysing the motivation of childfree choices, supported by the Capabilities Approach by Sen (1999) and Nussbaum (2000) that are bounded in the idea of freedom as human development. The changing reproductive attitudes in Norway and amongst neighbouring countries has been established (Cools and Strøm, 2020, Fluchtmann and Gustafsson, 2023, SSB, 2023), and

how there are evidences of changing norms, some based on concerns outside one's own control (Nakkerud, 2021).

The first analysis part gives insight into how the childfree are navigating their lives with a high degree of competence and autonomy (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 10), grounding their childfree choices in wanting to remain the same, discover new things about themselves, enjoying their time, and not weighing the responsibility of having children as ideal towards these factors they hold as positive. Three of the respondents name their partner as an important factor for their choice, as well as showing openness to reconsider if their partner had a deep desire to be a parent. Additionally, the first analysis bear markings of disappointing expectations, and having to defend their choice through various social institutions. Not meeting reproductive expectation, especially those of close family members can bring a sadness and feeling of loss over something that does not exist. This highlights the duality of what their childfree choice entail.

As the second part of the analysis give us a larger dataset of 291 respondents through the online survey to interpret and gather trends from, 34 of these childfree individuals. 46 respondents of 291 feel that reproduction is a duty, yet this is predominantly in younger age groups, and fade, possibly as a conception, or a pressure, in the older groups. The respondents 'own wish' is the absolute most frequently chosen reason for their reproductive choice, but unlike other categories, the childfree less frequently name other reasons or list secondary reasons for their choice, indicating that their motivation is intrinsic (Ryan and Deci, 2017: 14). A large majority (75%) are understanding and positive towards the childfree, while 81% deem reproductivity as a topic that should be possible to discuss, or is important to discuss.

The quantitative findings may seem in conflict with the experiences of three interviewees from the first analysis, who have many experiences with being invalidated in their choice. However, three of the respondents of another composition perceive the childfree choice as generally more socially accepted in later years, which shows a diversity of experiences among the childfree. Nakkerud (int.) points to the development in the last six years since he started his research in the field in 2017, and that the childfree topic has "*become a much clearer discussion*". The continuation of the childfree discourse will hopefully be more recognised and accepted as a valid life path in the years to come.

The childfree give through the interviews an impression of being dynamic, searching and positive, and have not closed the door to reproduction. They also seem very aware to aspects of society they do not condone, as well as having a global overview and concern. They are affected by societal factors, and does not deem it a suitable time for children to be born, and will not bear responsibility if their narrative prevails as correct. In the meanwhile they further themselves, and hold their cards to themselves, seeing that not every social institution that asks are ready for their answers. If the time or situation comes for a reevaluation, all respondents say through their interviews that they will cross that bridge when they get there.

The dynamic nature of this choice, evolving with life stages and situations, is crucial to understand, which I interpret as prevalent and relevant in the interviews. Being childfree, a freedom equivalent to having children, is seen not as a rejection of parenthood but as an affirmation of other life aspects deemed significant, aligning with the concept of self-realization and fulfilling one's potential in various domains. It might just be that we ought to look deeper into how domains and horizons could merge, and social institutions developed for building affiliation.

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