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Research Article

Couples' decisions to have a first child: Comparing pathways to early and late parenthood

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Couples' decisions to have a first child: Comparing pathways to early and late parenthood

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Abstract

We investigate the decision-making process of having a first child, using theories on individualisation, lifestyle choices and negotiating partnerships as a starting point. We compare couples who had their first child at a relatively young age with those who had their first child at an older than average age, using data from semi-structured interviews with 33 couples, selected from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS). Although expecting more explicit decision-making among older parents, our qualitative analyses show that decision-making preceding both early *and* postponed first childbirth is often implicit. Disagreement between partners does not necessarily lead to discussion. Factors that result in the postponement of childbearing, such as higher education, do not always play a conscious role in people's decision-making processes.

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1. Introduction

In Western societies today, having children is, for most people, a matter of *if* and *when*. The disconnection between having a sexual relationship and having children has resulted in lifestyle choices (Giddens 1991) that have never existed before in human history. Like Giddens, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim also emphasize the importance of making choices in modern society: "The choosing, deciding, shaping human being who aspires to be the author of his or her own life, the creator of an individual identity, is the central character of our time" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002:22-23). These lifestyle choices complicate partner relationships and many authors assume that communication and negotiation between partners have increased (De Swaan 1981; Van der Avort 1987; Giddens 1991, 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995; Lewis 2001). According to Beck (1992), modern marriages and families are made by the joining of individuals, and as a consequence are more contingent upon decision-making and planning. Giddens describes how social relationships have become more democratic and he refers to democratic romantic relationships as pure relationships. According to him, "the imperative of free and open communication is the sine qua non of the pure relationship" (Giddens 1992: 192).

It is a common sense idea that having children usually is a choice about which partners preferably reach agreement. Authors also assume that the duration of the decision-making process is increasing. For instance, Beck and Beck-Gernsheim write about the decision of whether to have children: "What is thought of as a situation requiring a decision often turns into a long-drawn-out process" (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995: 110-111). An important reason for this is that the demands on parenthood have increased, since parallel to the freedom to choose, children have become a precious possession. Having children might be preceded by a long process of thought, reflection discussion between partners. This decision process has not received much attention in empirical studies on fertility yet. Most fertility research is quantitative and focuses on determinants of fertility outcomes such as number of children and timing of birth. Yet, part of the demographic research that aims at explaining fertility outcomes implicitly assumes conscious decision-making, whether extensive or not, for instance, linking childbearing intentions to behaviour or assuming that people weigh costs and rewards of having children. To study *how* people decide on having children – how much thought they gave it, if they consciously weighed costs and rewards, what dilemmas they have faced and how they deliberate to reach a decision – qualitative research is appropriate.

Studies on the decision to have children usually only included either women (Den Bandt 1982; Gerson 1985; Van Luijn 1996; Wijsen 2002; Bernardi 2003; Sevón 2005) or, to a much lesser extent, men (Jacobs 1995; Von der Lippe and Fuhrer 2004; Knijn,

Ostner, and Schmitt 2006). We included both partners in this study by having in-depth interviews with couples. We restrict ourselves to the decision-making on having a first child. For theoretical reasons, in particular the perspective that emphasizes increased duration of decision-related deliberations, we compare Dutch couples that had their first child at a more mature age with couples that had their first child at a relatively young age.[3] The leading question of this article is:

> *What is the nature of the decision-making process of having a first child among couples who had their first child at a relatively young age and couples who had their first child at a relatively old age? And to what extent and in which way does this process differ between the two groups?*

In particular we will examine (i) to what extent the decisions are taken implicitly or explicitly (Sillars and Kalbflesch 1989) – therefore we will focus on deliberations on the decision by each partner and the communication between them – and (ii) which motives and arguments play a role in the decisions on having a first child and the timing of the transition towards parenthood.

This study is conducted in the Netherlands, a country that belongs to the world's highest category with regard to postponing parenthood. The average age of mothers at the birth of their first child is 29. But not all young adults delay parenthood. For instance, 18% of first children born since 2000 in the Netherlands were born to a mother under 25 (Statistics Netherlands 2008, own calculations). Do such parents differ from older parents in their decision-making on the first child? Do different arguments play a role? Do younger couples communicate less? Or does their decision-making process just start earlier? Whereas Giddens as well as Beck and Beck-Gernsheim suggest that deliberate decision-making is currently a central characteristic of individuals and couples, we expect that postponed entry into parenthood is preceded by more extensive decision-making, more long-term planning and more discussion than young entry into parenthood. It is likely that people do not have equal abilities to engage in a reflexive biography (Mills 2007).

Pathways into parenthood evidently encompass many facets, from background characteristics, partnership histories and early child wishes to the joined decision-making process within the partner relationship. This article touches upon all these aspects, but focuses on the latter. Our study draws on 33 semi-structured interviews with couples that are selected from the respondents of the Netherlands Kinship Panel

3 We restrict ourselves to first births in this study, because it is likely that the nature of the decision-making on first, second, and subsequent children is different. Although decisions of younger and older parents on subsequent births might also diverge in interesting ways, we expect the differences on the decision on the first child to be most prominent.

Study (NKPS), a large-scale nationally representative survey (Dykstra et al. 2005). Of these couples, 17 had their first child at a young age and 16 couples at a relatively old age (see subsection 5.3.1 for age definitions). The interviews were held in 2006 and 2007.

2. Family planning in the Netherlands

A basic assumption of this study is that currently in the Netherlands, having children is a choice. Hence, we start from the idea that having children is preceded by decision-making, whether this decision-making was explicit or not, whether people are aware of the circumstances and experiences that influence their choice or not, and whether consensus between partners was reached or not.

Of course in reality having children is not always a choice. Some pregnancies may be unintended. Yet, the proportion of unintended pregnancies and births is relatively very low in the Netherlands. Unintended pregnancies refer to pregnancies that occur earlier than desired or were not wanted at all. In a comparative study based on the Family and Fertility Surveys from 1982, Jones et al. (1988) report that 7.8% of the *birth*s among 15-37 year old respondents in the 5 years before the survey were unintended. For comparison, the authors report a 36.9% unintended births in the United States. In the 2003 Netherlands Family and Fertility Survey, 10% of the women under 45 report to have ever had an unplanned pregnancy (including pregnancies that ended in abortion or miscarriage). Of those women, 83% report not more than one unintended pregnancy (own analysis).

In addition, the Netherlands has one of the lowest teenage fertility rates in the world, this rate is also considerably lower than that of its Western European neighbour countries. Abortion rates are low as well (Coleman and Garssen 2002). These indicators are generally seen as an indication of a low level of unwanted pregnancies. The 2003 Netherlands Family and Fertility Survey shows that 85% of fecund women between 18 and 45 who are not (trying to become) pregnant use a form of birth control, most commonly oral contraceptives. The main reason for not using birth control is not being in a relationship (De Graaf 2004). Coleman and Garssen (2002) speak of "nearly perfect birth control", and refer to the Netherlands as the land of "perfect family planning".

One could say, though, that good family planning not only concerns the prevention of unwanted births, it also concerns the realization of desired pregnancies. Estimates based on the 1998 Netherlands Fertility and Family Survey indicate that of women who are actively trying to get pregnant with a first child, 50% becomes pregnant within 3 months, almost 70% within 6 months and 80% within 18 months. Three percent of the women who actively try to get pregnant remain childless (Steenhof and De Jong 2000).

3. Theoretical framework

Since the contraceptive revolution, sexuality and reproduction are no longer evidentially connected. The other side of the coin is that people have to decide on their reproduction, which might not always be experienced as an easy thing to do. Even if a pregnancy is unplanned, one has to decide whether or not to carry the pregnancy to term.

Giddens (1991, 1992), Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002) reflect on decision-making by way of "grand concepts" that structure modern people's lives including the transition towards parenthood, such as "choice biography", "reflexive modernity", "and democratic partnerships". However, their theoretical ideas are not aimed directly at conducting empirical research. For the purpose of our study, these ideas have to be translated into more concrete concepts specifically related to childbearing decisions. In our interpretation, these ideas suggest that men and women think individually about the decision to have children, reflect extensively on their (future) circumstances in this process, and plan ahead. They also have "linked lives" (Elder 1994); they are mutually dependent and therefore have to balance their own deliberations with their partners'. Hence the decision-making process is assumed to happen in a dialogue between partners.

With regard to thoughts, deliberations and dialogue during the decision-making process, Spiegel (1960) already assumed that traditional couples make decisions more automatically than modern couples. By definition, traditionalism implies self-evidence of crucial life events, such as family formation. Traditional life relieves people from decision-making: strict norms and values regulate people's lives. Similarly, Sillars and Kalbflesch (1989) speak of implicit decision-making and contrast this with explicit decision-making. Implicit decision-making is an indirect, non-reflective style of decision-making. Explicit decisions are made by partners who plan proactively and are aware that they are in a process of decision-making. They deliberate explicitly on the issue, and if needed they negotiate. Partners might already agree on the wish to become parents, but even then they might have discussions or negotiate, for instance on the timing of the birth or how to live their lives as parents. In short, the theoretical views of Giddens, Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim suggest that births in the present day are preceded by explicit decision-making, which is characterized by thought, planning and communication between partners.

Previous empirical (qualitative) research on another partner issue, namely the division of household tasks and paid labour, shows that decision-making on this topic is quite implicit (Evertsson and Nyman 2008; Wiesmann et al. 2008). Such a division of tasks may come into existence in daily routines, by taking gender assumptions for granted. The decision on whether or not to have a child, however, is of a different

nature. Having a child is irreversible and presumes sustained commitment to supporting the child. Moreover, entering parenthood arguably involves the most profound change in an individual's life course (Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995), therefore more explicit deliberations might be expected here. Yet, a reason for non-communication about having children could be that partners think they agree without making sure that that is the case. They might believe that once they are married, having children will be a matter of course. If partners indeed agree without deliberations, they have reached spontaneous consensus (Scanzoni and Szinovacz 1980). However, there might also be silent arrangements when partners have different wishes (Scanzoni and Szinovacz 1980). People might not raise the issue of having children because they think their partner does not want children yet. Studies on partner interactions (Hochschild 1989; Komter 1989) show that men and women implicitly influence each other, for instance through latent power mechanisms. The partner who wants to maintain the status quo benefits from not talking about a contested issue. Other studies (Nederlandse Gezinsraad 2001) show that women tend to wait with raising the issue until they feel that their partner is willing to discuss it. They tend to observe their partner's reaction to child-related issues, such as births among relatives and friends, and conclude how eager he is to have children himself.

The fact that partners have linked lives might have several implications. Interdependency means that partners have to balance their own interests and those of their partners. On the one hand, people may only want children if it fits into their own lives or postpone the first birth until they are ready to adjust their lives. Common explanations for the postponement of first births are that women's increased education and labour market participation confronts them with a lack of possibilities to combine work and care. Likewise, increased individualism and consumerism among young generations make people want to develop themselves and enjoy their freedom (preferably with dual-earner purchasing power) before they have children (Knijn, Ostner, and Schmitt 2006). On the other hand, one partner cannot continue to follow his or her own interests if these contradict the other partner's interests in such a crucial life event as having children. What does this mean when one partner wants a child and the other one does not (yet)? One option is that a couple only tries to have a child if both partners want it. This means that each partner has veto power (Thomson and Hoem 1998), or stated differently, people might be very sensitive to their partner's wishes: "I would like to have a child with you, but only if you also want it".

Another option is that one partner is most influential in the decision, regardless of whether or not this partner wants a child yet. This influence could have a basis in socio-economic resources, meaning that the partner with the most resources has a decisive say (Blood and Wolfe 1960). Influence also can be based on spheres of interest; because of gender patterns, children are still in the women's sphere (Thomson 1997). Studies on

fertility behaviour, however, show an equal influence of men's and women's childbearing preferences or intentions (Thomson, McDonald, and Bumpass 1990; Thomson 1997; Thomson and Hoem 1998), and support the veto power process to some extent; the fertility behaviour of couples with disagreeing childbearing desires is more similar to that of couples in which both partners want no (more) children than to couples with a shared desire for (more) children (Beach et al. 1982; Miller and Pasta 1996; Thomson 1997; Thomson and Hoem 1998). Here we are interested in the underlying processes of these outcomes.

Besides examining the extent to which couples' decision-making is explicit, we focus on the motives and arguments that are important in the choice for and timing of the first child. There is an enormous body of theoretical and empirical literature on factors that affect childbearing outcomes, such as education, career (prospect), social norms, composition of the family of origin, and partner relationship quality. Socio-cultural theories assume that fertility is affected by value orientations such as religion, gender roles, hedonism and self-fulfilment (Lesthaeghe and Van de Kaa 1986; Van de Kaa 1987; Lesthaeghe 1995), or by more specific norms such as family norms on ideal family sizes (Axinn, Clarkberg, and Thornton 1994) and ideal ages to have children (Steenhof and Liefbroer 2008). Socio-economic theories such as the New Home Economics (Becker 1991) envision fertility from the view of direct costs and opportunity costs, and assume that individuals or couples make rational choices based on socio-economic resources, such as their education, income and career prospects. Partner relationship quality could also be the subject of considerations on having children (Lillard and Waite 1993; Myers 1997; Rijken and Liefbroer 2009), since children represent a large investment in the relationship and having children might benefit or harm the quality of the relationship. In its turn, the quality of the partner relationship conditions the well being of potential children.

In addition, there is a literature that focuses on the costs and rewards that people attach to having children. This started with a study by Hoffmann and Hoffman (1973) on the value of children (see Liefbroer 2005 for an overview of the value-of-children literature). In such studies the perceived costs and rewards, usually measured with standard questionnaires, are either connected with childbearing desires and intentions, or prospectively or retrospectively linked to actual childbearing behaviour. Since children are no longer needed for securing parents' old age or for contributing to household income, the emotional value is assumed to have increased (Ariès 1973; Shorter 1975). Indeed, Fawcett (1988), in summarizing the value-of-children literature, concludes that the most important rewards of having a child are psychological in nature and the major costs are financial and career related. Similarly, in reviewing some Dutch studies on the motivations for parenthood, Knijn (1997) concludes that emotional-affective motivations are of overriding importance. In this study we will examine if and

how arguments and motives based on potential costs and rewards of having children and other factors discussed above play a role in people's own deliberations on having their first child.

4. Methods

4.1 Sample selection

The 33 couples that participated in this study were selected from the first wave of the NKPS (Dykstra et al. 2005), a large-scale nationally representative survey among 8,161 inhabitants of the Netherlands held in 2002 and 2003. We first selected heterosexual couples who had at least one newborn child in or after 2000 and who did not have children from prior relationships (because we wanted the couple's first child to be the first child for each partner). As we were interested in couples that had their first child either at a relatively young or a more mature age, we selected among these couples the youngest 20% and oldest 20% parents. This was based on the woman's age at first birth being either 25 years or younger or 33 or older, and her partner preferably being older for the old couples and not too much older for the young couples, since we also wanted the men to be relatively young or old fathers. We approached these couples with an introductory letter and a subsequent phone call to ask for participation, until we had enough participants. In total 101 letters were sent, and 85 respondents were reached by phone. Of those, 40% participated in our study.[4] The response rate was negatively influenced by the fact that both partners had to be willing to participate (women were more often willing then men) and to be available at the same time, and that in the same period these respondents were approached to participate in the second wave of the main NKPS survey. The interviews were conducted between November 2006 and April 2007 by the first author and two other interviewers.

4.2 Interview method and analysis

The main data collection method was the couple-interaction interview – a face-to-face, semi-structured interview with both partners. Bernard (1972) identified "his and her marriage" implying that partners may experience the same marriage in a different way. They may also experience the decision-making about their first child differently. An

[4] In total 34 couples were interviewed, but we decided to exclude one couple from the analysis. This couple adopted their first child when the woman was 33 and the man 35, but they had been trying to have a child since the woman was 26. Hence they do not really classify as "postponers".

additional advantage of interviewing partners together is that such interviews stimulate recall and clarification among participants, and partner interaction can result in a fuller account of the topic (Allan 1980). Although previous studies have shown that during such interviews partners do talk about past or present disagreeing views or conflict (Knijn, Ostner, and Schmitt 2006; Wiesmann et al. 2008), it has also been shown that spouses are less likely to reveal their own viewpoints in a joint interview (Hertz 1995; Zipp and Toth 2002; Boeije 2004). To meet this potential weakness and to make each partner aware of his or her individual ideas and desires, each partner completed an individual questionnaire at the start of the interview. Besides background information, in this questionnaire respondents were asked about their personal childbearing desires and intentions in the past and present, and about satisfaction with the timing of the birth of each of their children. They were however informed in advance that the interviewer would use their answers in the couple interview. In addition, each partner filled out a life history timeline containing details on partnerships, births, education, work and migration, to create a simplified form of a "life history calendar" (Freedman et al. 1988). The use of such a document by interviewer and participant during the interview can improve the quality of retrospectively asked information (Freedman et al. 1988).

A life course perspective was used in the interactive interview (Scanzoni and Szinovacz 1980). First, respondents were asked to tell something about the family they grew up in. Then they were asked if and how they thought about having children when they were in their late teens and how these ideas developed later on, possibly within relationships prior to their current relationship. The main emphasis of the interview was on the decision-making process of having children within the current relationship, and we asked about deliberations, agreeing or disagreeing ideas, communication, negotiation et cetera. In order to stimulate thinking and talking about which motives and arguments were important to respondents, the interviewers used cards that mentioned issues which might play a role in deciding about having children. Each partner was asked separately to select those cards with topics that had been important to him or her, to put these in order of importance, and to explain why and how these issues played a role. They could use blank cards to add issues and could also indicate which issues were absolutely unimportant to them. Topics referred to different types of potential arguments and motives, such as practicalities (e.g., housing), biological clock, religion, norms, youth family experiences, or to terrains on which children can bring costs or rewards (e.g., freedom, career, relationship quality). The cards only contained one or a few keywords, mostly without indicating a direction (pro or against childbearing, delaying or speeding up the decision), so that respondents would explain in their own words how certain issues played a role in their decision.

The interviews were held at the respondents' homes, and completing the questionnaire and the interactive interview took an average of two hours. All interviews

were recorded electronically, fully transcribed, and read in order to ensure a broad acquaintance with the couple's story. Summaries and memos were written throughout this process. Next, transcripts were coded and analysed using MaxQDA, a computerized program for coding and fragment retrieval of qualitative data. During this period the codes, emerging themes and concepts were discussed with the co-author (peer debriefing) in order to verify the interpretations.

4.3 Description of the sample

Of the 33 couples, 17 had their first child at a young age and 16 at an older age. Most of the young parents were in their late twenties or thirties at the time of the interview, whereas most of the older parents were in their forties. The young mothers had their first child at a mean age of 23.2 and their partners were aged 25.4 on the average. The older mothers and fathers entered parenthood when they were aged respectively 35.1 and 37.6 on the average. In both groups, two-child families were most prevalent. Only a few couples had one or three children at the time of the interview. Among the young parents there were also four couples with four or five children; these were orthodox protestant couples. Among the older parents there were also a few religious couples, but not orthodox.

Of the older parents, all but two couples were married when their first child was born. Only half of the young couples were married when they had their first child, some of them married later. Among the older group, both partners in nine couples followed higher professional or university education, of the other couples one or both partners had at least upper secondary vocational training. Most men and women in the young group were educated at a low or medium level (no higher than upper secondary vocational school). Four out of the five young couples in which one or both partners did have higher professional or university education were either strictly religious or their first child was unplanned. Finally, most respondents were Dutch and a few were Western immigrants who had partnered a Dutch person. The couples lived throughout the Netherlands, in urban and rural areas.

Most of the differences on these background characteristics between the young and the older parents in our study are also found between the samples of young (N = 125) and older parents (N = 117) in the NKPS dataset from which our respondents were drawn (see subsection 5.3.1 for sample criteria). Average ages at first birth in our groups and in the NKPS samples are almost identical. Of the young parents in the NKPS dataset, 17% has four or more children, while only 1% of the older parents have four or more children (at the time of the survey, which is 3 to 4 years before our interview). About 13% of young fathers and 10% of young mothers are higher

educated, whereas about half of older fathers and mothers are higher educated. Furthermore, while about a quarter of the young parents in the dataset attend church at least once a week; none of the older parents visit church with this frequency. However, the high proportion of older parents in our study that was married before the birth of their first child deviates from the proportion in the dataset, which is about 60%. About the same proportion of younger parents in the dataset was married before the birth of their first child.

Typically, the older parents in our study met each other at an older age than the young parents, and also had their first child later into the partnership. In the NKPS samples the relationships in which the first child is born started when young and older mothers were aged 18 and 26 on average. Examining our respondents' "partnership routes" from dating to the birth of the first child in more detail, several patterns in each group can be distinguished. The most prevalent pattern among young parents is that the partners met each other when they were in their teens – in a few cases the man was in his early twenties – with the birth of their first child taking place 5 to 9 years later, after a few years of cohabitation and sometimes marriage. The other young couples had their first child sooner after the start of the relationship: four pregnancies were unplanned, and there are four orthodox protestant couples who started dating around age twenty and married within a couple of years. They waited with sexual intercourse until marriage, and did not use contraceptives. These strongly religious couples all had their first child about one year after marriage. Finally, two non-religious couples had a planned child soon after the start of their relationship. They started living together soon after they met, and one or both of the partners in these couples had cohabited or been married before.

In the group with the most prevalent pattern among the older couples, the partners started dating halfway in their twenties and had a first child 8 to 14 years later, usually after several years of cohabitation (up to 10 years), and all but one couple after marriage. This pattern resembles the most prevalent pattern among the younger couples, but the older couples met later and waited longer with having children within the relationship. Three couples had experienced fertility problems. They started trying to have a child when the women were about 30 years old, which is 5 to 10 years after the start of their relationship, and it took between 2 and 10 years before the women became pregnant. Four couples met when both partners were age 30 or older (up to age 43), after which cohabitation, marriage and childbirth followed quite quickly. All but one of the partners in these four couples had cohabitated or had been married at least once before. Two couples met in their late twenties and had a child within 5 years. All young and older mothers, except for those with unplanned pregnancies and those in couples with fertility problems, became pregnant within a year after the couple stopped using

contraceptives – or started sexual intercourse in the case of very religious couples. Most became pregnant within a few months.

5. Desires to have children

"I assume that I was born with a desire to have children", said a woman who had her child at age 20 in reaction to our question on how she thought about having children when she was around 18. In contrast, a man started laughing and could not imagine that any young man would even think about having children. Since insight into decision-making starts with knowing preferences (Scanzoni and Szinovacz 1980), we asked respondents about the ideas and wishes with regard to age of entry into parenthood and numbers of children they had from about age 18 onwards. Only a few current parents - men and women - were once sure that they would not want to have children at all. Many used to have a latent desire to have children: they had never imagined themselves staying childless, but did not give the issue much thought when they were younger. Some claimed they really did not give any thought to having children for a long time, such as the man who did not think about the possibility of having children until a second partner raised the issue when he was 34 years old. Apparently one can easily disconnect oneself from the idea of having children even if children are nearby. This man's sister had children long before he had. Yet, he said that "she was in such a different world", that this did not make him think about having children himself; it did not apply to him.

Comparing old and young parents, the most striking difference is that most of the women who entered parenthood young say they used to have a strong urge to have children, while the procreative desires of young men and older men and women varied more. Young mothers also stand out because as teenagers they knew that they wanted to be a young mother although exact ideal ages were not mentioned. This was not mentioned so often by young fathers.

Desires and intentions are, of course, not static (Heaton, Jacobson, and Holland 1999; Liefbroer, in press); especially among those women who entered parenthood late there are some stories of changing or ambivalent wishes for children. Sometimes the wish was generated by the partnership. Some men and women did not want children until they were in a "now or never" situation.

Finally, many women talked more extensively about the desire for children they had when they were younger than most of the men. An explanation for this might be that women are better able to disconnect parenthood and partnership than men. According to Townsend (2002:84), "there is an asymmetry in the ways that men and women think about becoming parents. Women are able to weigh and articulate their

specific desire for children outside the matrix of the family and the relationship with a man". The men Townsend talked to did not talk about having children without talking about having a family or being a family man. "For these men, having children was part of the package deal of being married and having children" (Townsend 2002:84). In contrast to Townsend's finding, some men we talked to had a strong wish for children at a young age, which they often related to the fact that they liked playing with little cousins, nephews or nieces. Yet, only women had clearly considered motherhood separately from partnership when they were younger; some thought about how they would arrange things if they became pregnant as a teenager or about having children outside of a partnership, as Jessica[5] did:

Jessica: I never imagined myself childless. No… But I did imagine myself as a lone mother (laughing).
Bob: Did you?
Jessica: Yes, at the time my parents got divorced, I thought: I will have children by myself.

Other women, however – like many men – did not think about children at all before they met their partner.

6. Implicit and explicit decision-making

6.1 To have or not to have children

For many of the couples we interviewed, the decision-making about having a first child consisted of two steps. First, partners decided that they want to have children, and then, usually at a later stage of the relationship, the timing of the first child was decided upon. Actually, many people acted straightforwardly; over half of the couples we interviewed, but clearly more older than young parents, explored each other's inclination to have children in the beginning of the relationship, They explicitly asked about it somewhere in the first year of the relationship, before cohabitation. Most remember a specific conversation, others do not but say they are sure they talked about it. The few couples who met each other in their thirties or forties and had their child quite soon after that, already discussed the issue on one of the first dates. Among each of these couples, one of the partners had a strong desire for children and for them it was a relationship

[5] For reasons of privacy, the names of the respondents in this article are fictitious.

prerequisite to have an agreement on having children – the more so if they had left their previous partner because that partner did not want to have children.

None of the couples that discussed whether or not to have children early in the relationship were confronted with disagreement. Either both partners already knew they wanted children before the relationship started, or the child wish emerged from meeting the right partner. Another option is feeling so committed to one's partner that one goes along with the other's child wish, as is expressed by David, who met Angela at age 24, followed by the birth of their first child 2 years later:

David: In my previous partnership, having children was not an issue. Maybe it would have happened… once, but not for a while. And when I met Angela, well… there are things I find important in a relationship and there are things she finds important in a relationship. And she was very sure she wanted to be a young mother, and I was very sure that I wanted to stay with her. So… I thought: Let's just start a family soon.

Like those older respondents who had made it clear from the start that they only wanted to get seriously involved if their partner agreed with their wish to have children, this young woman Angela was very explicit. The biological clock appears to be ticking at younger ages too. Even though she had more time, she did not experience it that way: she explains that she felt her biological clock ticking because she was so eager to be a young mother. Some of the partners like David, who did not have a clear desire to have a child themselves, assert that they had never given any thought to having children until their partner started talking about it. Some were even surprised by the question yet still agreed.

In general, couples did not waste many words on the issue if it became clear that they both agreed on having a child some day. After this was expressed, they did not talk about it for a long while, sometimes years, until one or both partners thought it was time to have a child or at least to make concrete plans for the short term. How many children one preferred was usually not discussed in those early conversations, nor was the timing of the first child, as the following fragments illustrate:

Judith: When the issue came up for the first time, both of us felt like: We will have children once… And we went on with our lives. We never discussed when we would have them. And at a certain point I thought: About now.

Interviewer: When did you know that you wanted children?

Max: Quite soon after we met we knew neither of us was against having children. We knew that within a year after we met, I guess
Lisa: That we would once… indeed. But at that moment we hadn't yet… discussed when.
Max: Yes, we had been clear that we both wanted it, and that was it.
Lisa: And it stayed like that for a good many years.

Max and Lisa started dating when they were 24 and 25, and had their first child about 9 years later. Some of the couples who met each other late and faced time pressure were exceptional in making a time plan right away.

However, implicit agreement on having children still exists. Couples who did not mention having children early in their relationships sometimes refer to a greater sensitivity for each other's desires: "we felt the same", "we knew without saying how the other thought about it", "the desire for having children grew". Sometimes not mentioning the wish for having children is religiously based. For these couples, marriage self-evidently brings children.

The story can also be different if partners have or assume that they have divergent preferences. Some older couples did not discuss the issue of having children until they had been together for years because the women did not want to push their partners who were not "ready for it". This is obvious from the interview fragments with the following three couples: Ellen and Frank, who were 38 and 43 when their first child was born; Peter and Kim, aged 34 and 37 at first childbirth; and Irene and Robert, who became parents at ages 38 and 47:

Interviewer: When did you start to feel time pressure?
Ellen: Er, time really started pressing when I approached 40. When I was 37. Then I started to talk to Frank, like: "If we want children…", and I wanted them… But I always thought that Frank was not really interested in having children, that he'd let me have them. But if I think about it more deeply, I think he does enjoy them, that is now of course, that goes without saying, but then, although he was one of those men who don't really need to have children, he could see the fun or the happiness of having children. But he always wanted other things first; at work, the house wasn't finished… So it was always too early for him.

Later in the interview:

Ellen: Well, I did not have the idea that he wanted children. I still see him that way: as a man who does not have desires in that direction himself. He may not be yearning to have children, but I don't see him as someone that would say "please no" either.

Peter: You know, women determine that sort of thing, it's not a man's business.
Kim: But you were open to it.
Peter: Yes…
Kim: You could understand my wish, but for you our life without children was okay.
Peter: Let's just say I was not dying to have kids.
Interviewer: You didn't feel a desire…
Peter: No, I myself not… Now he [their son] is there, I enjoy it, but I did not feel a need to have a child.

Irene: I thought children were really fun and I thought it would give so much joy to have a child, or children, together, and to be able to raise, to bring up a child together… Yes, I really thought that could be very nice.
Interviewer: Did you think he didn't want to have children, in the beginning, or…?
Irene: Well, in the beginning I was sure he didn't want to.

At first glance, these couples' stories seem to be characterized by latent power mechanisms (Komter 1989). They did not explicitly talk about their desires for a family nor agreed that they would try to have children some day. Implicitly, the partners knew each other's divergent inclinations regarding childbearing, and the men, who were not craving to have children, seemed to benefit from the status quo. What, then, are the characteristics of the turning point, what happened, and why was the decision to have a child made in the end?

Ellen and Frank were renovating a house and this project took several years. Ellen explains that in her head she postponed having children year after year – especially since she assumed Frank did not like the idea of having a child while working on the house – until she really felt time was short and decided the house had to be finished after the first child was born. This was when she was 37. Then the decision-making became more explicit, although communication was one-sided: Ellen kept repeating that if they wanted children it should happen now, until Frank agreed. However, she

also explains that she operated diplomatically, by not raising the issue too often and by not mentioning yet that she actually wanted to have three children. Hence until Ellen was 37, it seems like Frank was indeed exercising latent power.

Taking a closer look at the two other couples' stories, their situation seems to be different. When their relationships started, the women did not think about having children at all. Kim indicates that she had always had the idea that she would have children, but her relationship with Peter started slowly and grew stronger very gradually. Besides, when she met him she enrolled in a 4-year full-time education program, so having children was not an issue at that moment anyway. After graduating she very much enjoyed her teaching job, and did not like the idea of putting a child in day care, which caused conflict with her child wishes. When Peter lost his job because of long-term disability, the opportunity to have a child arose: he would be the full-time homemaker. Eventually it was Peter who told Kim that now was the time:

Peter: It didn't really matter to me, to be honest. I'm rather easy. If someone really wants something, well, you only live once. It's like that with everything.

Kim: That's what you said indeed: "If you want to experience it, we should do it now. Now is the time."

Unlike Kim, Irene had not though about having children before her relationship started; her desire for children grew gradually within the relationship. When she met Robert she was very ambitious, doing two studies and dreaming of a career as a musician. She explains that at that time she was only focused on herself, hardly had time for a relationship, and did not think about having children at all. However, her life became quieter, the relationship went steady and her desire for a child developed. Robert, who once was sure he did not want to have children, had developed a more open attitude towards it over time, although both partners agree during the interview that they would not have had children if Irene had not wanted it. Unlike Peter, who claims he never really thought about the decision to have children, Robert weighed the pros and cons for a long time before agreeing to have a child. This however did not result in much explicit communication; both partners emphasize in the interview that they did not talk about the issue much. It was clear to both of them that she wanted a child, but he was not sure about it, so he thought about it by himself. An important aspect of Robert and Irene's story is that both liked their life as it was (with a lot of travelling), so when they decided to stop using contraceptives, their attitude was: "It's now or never, let's see what happens".

These stories show that the fact that the women did not have a clear inclination for childbearing in the beginning and that they enjoyed their childless life may have

contributed to the fact that the issue was not discussed for a long while. Hence these couples' postponement of parenthood cannot be attributed exclusively to latent power exercised by men. Although these couples would not have had children if the women had not wanted it, both women say they would also have accepted not having children. This is reflected in the fact that both couples had decided not to obtain medical treatment if a pregnancy did not occur naturally. In the case of Robert and Irene, this took 7 years.

We would like to note that it was not always the woman who had to convince her partner of having children, as in the cases we described above. In some cases the man was more willing to have children than the woman. However, among the couples in our study, those women were quite easily convinced by their partner. One man though divorced his previous partner because after 12 years she still doubted whether she dared take the step towards parenthood.

6.2 Timing of the first child

As mentioned before, a majority of the couples agreed on having children early in their relationship. Most of the older parents and some young parents had explicitly talked about it. In contrast, other young couples had implicitly and correctly assumed or sensed it. However, even if the wish to have children was explicitly expressed, the timing of the first childbirth was not discussed. At most, the partners agreed that they wanted to have children, but not for some time yet. Then the issue was off the agenda for a while. The next step in the process of decision-making – *when* to have the first child[6] – usually started when one or both partners thought it was (almost) time to have a child. Agreement was reached quickly, except in a few cases. Apart from three older mothers (Ellen, Irene and Kim, who waited for their partners to agree as we described above) only one young mother had to talk a lot – for about one and a half years – to convince her partner to have a child. Despite his desire to become a young parent, he was afraid to make the decision and would actually have preferred it if his partner had gotten pregnant by accident. Deliberate planning is not an attractive strategy to everybody. To this young man, for instance, taking paternal responsibility for an unplanned child seemed more masculine than planning to have a child, which he thought of as "petit-bourgeois" in a way. Moreover, the freedom to choose implies the obligation to choose, and this man reasoned that if he would not take the decision deliberately, he also could not regret it.

[6] For those couples who did not talk and sometimes did not even think about having children until they wanted to have their first one, just because having children was self-evident to them, these two aspects of the decision-making – *if* and *when* to have a children – are not really distinguishable.

Choosing can become problematic. Sandra and Tom, whose relationship started when they were 21 and 28, but did not have a child until 13 years later, also had divergent ideas on having children and discussed it little. Their dilemma was not so much whether they wanted to have children, but whether or not to have children *with each other*. At the start of their relationship they explicitly exerted their wish to have children within marriage. Whereas Tom was sure quite soon that Sandra was the partner with whom he wanted all that, she doubted for a long time whether he was "Mr. Right". Tom patiently waited for Sandra to make the decision (which she did after following a course on "What do I want with my life?") without much communication on the topic:

Sandra:	We had not been together that long when it became clear that both of us wanted children. And that we wanted more than one. And that the logical order would be: getting married first, and then children. That was early in our relationship…
Tom:	That has always been clear.
Sandra:	Yes, it was clear early on. So we didn't have to talk about that endlessly.
Interviewer:	Yes, exactly… And then the issue was…
Sandra:	Dropped for a while. And then I thought: Do I want this? Is this the partner with whom I want to spend the rest of my life? Is this the one with whom I want to have children? That was the question for me. If I was going to marry someone, that man would be the father of my children. Well, and then…
Tom:	And who you will be with for the rest of your life, because you don't intend to get divorced.
Sandra:	Yes.
Tom:	I would have wanted children earlier, and to get married earlier.
Interviewer:	With her? So did you wait for her to decide, or something like that?
Tom:	Yes, I had to, didn't I? One needs two signatures…
Sandra:	And you didn't raise the subject every day, didn't you? You didn't ask me how I felt about it every day.

Usually, though, couples agreed directly or soon on more concrete plans to actually have a first child. Timing was generally not discussed much in advance – except for one couple that decided to have children after the man would have finished an evening education, no long time paths were planned. Among the young couples, timing was even less of an issue than among the older couples. Evidently, it was not an issue for those couples whose first child was unplanned, or for the religious couples who did not use contraceptives. But many of the other young parents did not talk about

having children before cohabitation either. Sometimes the issue was not raised until after marriage, when the women proposed to stop using contraceptives.

In addition, it became clear from most stories that the partners had not made individual time paths either. Except for a few who had not-so-precise ideas in the back of their minds, such as having children before age 30, or not having them before age 30, or to work for "some" years before having children. In contrast with theories on lifestyle choices, quite a number of respondents, especially young ones, but also some of the older parents, emphasize that they are not planners. Negative references are sometimes made to other people who do plan everything in their lives:

Barbara: It's of course very scary to say: "I will get married *then*, I'll buy a house *then*, we'll have a child *then*."

Ben: I keep saying that we are not planners, we did not deliberately plan things like: I first want to build a career in order to make enough money, and then I want my house to be perfect, and then we'll see whether we want to have children. No, we take life as it comes, live our lives by the day.

Besides planning and communication, deliberate thought and reflection is also an aspect of explicit decision-making (Sillars and Kalbflesch 1989). Among our interviewees, this happened much less than one would expect on the basis of theories on individualisation, which is made clear by the following fragment in which David reacts to the interview as follows:

David: You [towards interviewer] ask things one really never thinks about. Things happen, we are not really thinkers, we are doers. Like what you said about my child wish: first I didn't have a child wish, and then I had one. It was not demanded by Angela. But it's funny to see that, at a certain moment, I turned from "no, no, no" to "yes"! It's funny, if you think about it…

Only few parents, mainly older ones, spent considerable time thinking about the decision to have a child. Yet, this was always an individual issue, not much communicated with the partner.

One decision-making aspect found agreement among everyone we interviewed: they all thought that couples should only have a child if both partners agree. Hence each partner had veto power (Thomson and Hoem 1998) – in other words, each person only

wanted a child with his or her partner's consent or after giving consent.[7] This clearly emerges from some of the stories we discussed, in which one of the partners was ready for children sooner than the other and either waited patiently or actively tried to convince the partner. However, a "double veto power" or "double consent norm" is also expressed by couples who did not have divergent ideas on having children.

A difference in decision-making between younger and older parents that has not yet been discussed concerns practical issues related to having children; such as work and childcare arrangements. These are more extensively thought of and discussed by the older parents than by the young parents. Older parents usually discussed these issues before pregnancy though, when the decision to have a child in the short term was made, so such practical issues usually did not have a large influence on the timing. Young parents did not generally think of or discuss such practical issues until the women were pregnant, as the following interview fragments illustrate:

Interviewer: And did you discuss that beforehand, that you would reduce your working hours?

Mark: No, we'd never thought about that. It was like: Gosh, now we should work fewer hours. You just get into that automatically.

Young mother Nicole also explains that practicalities were not on her mind when she wanted a baby:

Nicole: Actually it was not until I was pregnant that we thought: Gee… Then you start thinking what to do about work, about babysitting. I hadn't figured that out beforehand. I just wanted to see what our child would look like. That seemed incredible to me, to see whether it would look like us…

In the next section we explore more extensively which issues played a role in the choice for and the timing of a first child.

[7] For men whose partner became pregnant by accident the case was a little different: they could only choose to stay or leave, and to be a participant father or not.

7. Giving up freedom? Motives and arguments

Why does one want a child? To watch one's own child grow up. To recognize oneself in the child.

And:

To give love to a child and receive love from it. That's the most important; the rest…

These statements reflect the importance of the emotional aspects of having children. The desire to "give love to a child and raise one's own child and see it grow up" was the major motive for our respondents to have children, combined with the condition of having a good relationship. Such motives did not cause much thought or discussion among the couples in our study. However, in previous relationships the quality of the partnership had been an issue in the decision not to have children. The idea that couples that are unhappy with their relationship might have children to improve the relationship was recognized; some couples even mentioned examples of this among couples they knew. But all expressed disapproval because it would not be fair to the child to be born in such a situation. With a few exceptions our respondents did not feel like they were influenced by norms on having children. Actually, the norm seems to be that the decision about the first child is purely made by the couple and does not involve anyone else's opinion, or anything that is not important to them. It has to be noted in this respect that our sample consists of people who do have children as the majority of the population, but who deviate from age standards at first childbirth.

An issue that is mentioned frequently by men and women, young as well as older parents, is the experience with or memories of their own youth in their family of origin. If they had pleasant memories, this was a reason to create a family of their own. Those who had a bad childhood wanted to do a better job than their parents, although initially some of them did not want to have children because of the lack of a good example. The influence of births among siblings and friends can go in two directions; sometimes it makes people feel like having children – for some it was even the immediate reason to have children. This kind of "contagion" (Bernardi 2003) corresponds to common sense. Yet, observing the consequences of having children can also evoke reluctance towards having children.

The biological clock is mentioned by almost all older mothers as having been very important for the timing of their first child. Only half of the older fathers mention this, either referring to the biological clock of their partner or to their own age. They did not want to become too old a father, so they would have some energy to play with the children and not be mistaken for the grandfather at the schoolyard. Remarkably, the

biological clock is also mentioned by a few young parents, both women and men: they explain that they felt some kind of time pressure because they really wanted to be young parents. Good housing is an important condition, but only plays a role in the timing of having a first child. Buying and or renovating a house sometimes took more time than expected, which resulted in some postponement of the first child.

We find more complex patterns when examining whether or not limitation of one's freedom was considered to be an important issue in decision-making about having children. This is often assumed to be an important reason for postponing children. The 2003 Netherlands Fertility and Family Survey (own analysis) shows that about 50% of men and women who did not have or try to have children before the age of 30 (women) or 33 (men) indicated "the wish to enjoy freedom first" as one of their reasons for postponing parenthood (they could indicate more than one reason).

Also among the parents in our study, reference to a loss of freedom is not uncommon. These parents anticipated that the transition to parenthood would imply a limitation of freedom. The expression used here is that "(the good) life stops" when one has children, as illustrated by Linda, who explains that she met her partner at age 30 and definitely wanted to travel before getting pregnant:

Linda: You know, I had just found my great love, then you just want to *live* for a while, first.

Ronald who had his first child when he was 38, says:

Ronald: I can't image myself having had children at age 24. It was not on my mind then, I was not ready for it, I didn't want it. If I saw people my age pushing a baby carriage, I thought: My God, what are you doing? Life has just started and you're already pushing a baby carriage.

However, not all parents agree with the "end of freedom" idea. Naomi, a young mother, explains that she does not understand why some people postpone having children:

Naomi: Well, more and more people have children at an older age. And why…? I don't really know. I always thought it would be fun to experience it when you are young! I don't look at it this way: I want to *live* first, and then have children, because, with children, you also have a life!

And another young couple:

Rachel: I don't feel like I'm restricted in my freedom, travelling, going out, now that I have children.
Paul: Yes, we do everything we want in consultation with our children. We do as much as possible together with the children.
Rachel: Yes, but if we want to go out just the two of us, we arrange for a babysitter. That's what I meant.
Paul: Yes we do.
Rachel: It's not like… We know a couple and they really live *for* their children. I mean, I really like children, but if I feel like going out at night, I arrange for a babysitter and do something. That couple really wouldn't do that. When I see that, I think: that would really feel confining. Some people say: you are *so* restricted once you have children…
Paul: That's nonsense.

Other young parents did feel like having children would restrict their freedom, but say they did not mind; they were not interested in going out or travelling to exotic countries, like Karen, who became a mother when she was 22 years old:

Interviewer: Do you also see disadvantages to young parenthood?
Karen: I don't really, not for myself, because I'm not so pushy, not a career person. But I think that for people who love to work a lot, or love to go out, or really want to do this or that… Yes, for them there is a disadvantage. Because you can't go anywhere you want. You're quite restricted. But… for myself I don't see a disadvantage. I like it like this.

Some older parents appear to have struggled more with the idea of losing their freedom. Besides limitations to travelling, reluctance towards stricter daily schedules, the fuss and organisational schemes as well as the responsibilities that come along with having children were their obstacles, as the following older parents point out:

Robert: Life was all about doing fun things, and I had already noticed from watching my sisters that as soon as children arrive, everything changes, schemes become very tight. And I thought: I'm absolutely not ready for that yet.

Steven: The consequences of having a child, we did discuss that. Like: How do we arrange things at work when the child is ill? Who takes the day off?

Laura: I thought it would be a very, very big step. And to me it was, er... a concern. It really felt like that. And we were really thinking about how we would do everything and I found it all very complicated.

Steven: Responsibility for a child…

Laura: Yes, and also, how do we fit it into our lives, while both of us have a job, how to handle all that? I thought it was a big thing. I do remember that.

Cindy: When I looked at my brothers and sisters, who already had children by then, I thought: Gee, I can't do all that, it's awful… What a… I always kept myself removed from it. Maybe that sounds weird, but I pushed it away from a certain moment onwards. Because it seemed really difficult to me.

Clearly, these respondents saw the transition to parenthood as a "heavy" step. Others, more often young parents, say they stepped into parenthood without thinking about it and did not care so much about responsibilities or practicalities in advance, as the following fragments illustrate:

Nicole: I kind of stepped into it blindly. I never thought about whether we could afford it.

Dennis: Well, at that age, I was in a relationship at a relatively young age, I already had a steady girlfriend when I was 14, and then I already thought about children. I thought about that rather early. And I never thought children would be troublesome, I never said that it would be a big responsibility. Maybe that's because I come from a big family.

Interviewer: So it was not like you had everything settled first; owning a home and…

Jacob: No, not at all. We had no jobs and no…

Christina: No, actually we didn't have anything (laughing).

Jacob: No permanent housing.

Christina: Yet, it was a wonderful time. I don't think I would have wanted it any other way.

Jacob: I think we would do it all over again the same way.

Christina: Yes.

Interestingly, in contrast with the older parents who indicate they worried about losing their freedom before they decided to have their first child, other older parents explicitly state that thoughts about limitation of freedom did not play a role in their decision-making process. Notwithstanding the fact that they also experienced an (extended) childfree period in which they enjoyed their freedom to go out, travel and/or spend a lot of time on their career, whether as singles, in previous relationships or in their current relationship. These parents explain that the idea of having children did not come up at all during those years, so they also did not worry about anything. Nor did they plan ahead, as in "after our world trip, we can have children". Not until these respondents felt like they had seen and done everything did having children become an issue. In this phase of life they no longer dreaded loss of freedom or responsibilities, as Daniel, who had his first child when he and his wife were 40, and Tom tell:

Daniel: Before this, I was in a relationship in which I did have the freedom to travel… Well, we both got to experience that, so we didn't have that hanging over our heads.

Tom: I saw with friends who already had children that you were more limited with travelling, and when getting together with friends. We used to have a lot of freedom. We gave each other a lot of autonomy in making appointments. Sometimes she would stay overnight somewhere, sometimes I would. With a child you can't do that anymore. We were aware of the fact that our trips, our vacations would be different. But did that play a role in the decision-making? No.

We see a similar pattern in the role of study, work and career in decision-making among older parents. Sometimes they deliberately planned the timing of having children in relation to study and career, or anticipated friction between having children and work. More common, however, is the absence of such planning or dilemmas because one started thinking about (the timing of) children later. The older parents who selected the card with study/work/career were mainly women. They indicated that they wanted to continue to work after the birth of their first child, but they work part-time and describe themselves as not career-oriented, which is typical for the majority of Dutch women. The few men who say that study or work played a role in the decision-making were either in a special situation, for example, pursuing evening education besides a job, or refer to their partner's study and work situation. The Netherlands

Fertility and Family Survey from 2003 shows that only about one in ten men who did not try to have children before age 33 indicated "wanting to gain working experience or make a career" as one of the reasons for postponement of having children, while about one in four postponing women did (own analysis).

Those older mothers and fathers who explicitly say that study or career was not a factor of importance at all, had already made a career when they started thinking about children. Hence, they never faced a dilemma or planned ahead for the children. Although the fact that they were studying or starting a career might have been a reason for not thinking about children earlier,[8] they did not experience this as a factor of influence, as is explained by Daniel:

Daniel: No, you know, and of course the advantage is also that, er… you already made your career, so you don't have to worry about that. So the drive, like: I have to do this and I have to do that – we'd already had that.

Irene very explicitly clarifies that, for her, education and career are not related to the timing of her child, despite the fact that she used to be very busy with two studies, self-focused and ambitious about a career as a musician:

Interviewer: Education, work, career, were those things an issue for you?
Irene: No, things went like that by accident, I mean, I used to be busy with my studies and with my career, but that has nothing to do with having children. It's not like I thought: I will finish my education first, then have a career, and maybe then have a child. No, when I was busy with those things I did not think about children at all.

In general, for the young parents studies and career were less important than for the older parents. Only a few of them selected the card with study and career, predominantly those whose first child was unplanned; they had worried that the unplanned pregnancy would hinder them in finishing their education. Many of the younger parents, however, explicitly mention that they do not care so much about having a career. Sometimes they seem to feel like they more or less deviate from "the norm" with regard to careers or self-development, and explicitly mention that they know that other people want to have a career or travel before having children, but that they were not interested in that.

[8] Having children before finishing full-time education is very rare in the Netherlands and is not supported by policy, therefore having children while studying is probably not thought of as an option at all by most people.

In general, there is reasonable agreement between the issues partners mention to have played a role during the decision. Although they selected their own cards, and were asked to reflect on them in turn, often a "we-story" emerged about what was important to them. One might expect that divergence in what was found important in making a decision about the timing of the first child might result in discussion; yet, we did not find a clear pattern between degree of agreement in motives and arguments and degree of communication during the decision-making process. Divergence in what partners found important can coincide with a very implicit decision-making process, and among the few couples who communicated a lot during this process, some have almost identical lists and others different lists. Identical lists of motives and arguments of course do not imply that partners are ready to have children at the same time.

Finally, it has to be noted, that the request to select cards with arguments and motives did not make much sense to some people. Especially young couples who had a very implicit decision-making process stressed that "the feeling" – the desire for a child and the feeling that one is ready for it – was all that mattered.

8. Conclusion and discussion

The standard biography in which partnership, marriage and having children were inextricably bound together has been replaced by a choice biography; people decide if they want to have children, with whom, when and how many. Authors like Giddens (1991, 1992), Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim (Beck 1992; Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 1995, 2002) theoretically emphasize the importance of lifestyle choices and sketch modern individuals and couples who plan, reflect and negotiate. We applied this theoretical view in an empirical study of a crucial lifestyle choice: the choice to have children and when to have the first child. In-depth interviews with 33 Dutch parental couples were used to investigate the nature of the decision-making process that precedes the birth of a first child.

In the view of our theoretical framework, the most remarkable finding is that the decision-making among the couples in our study was generally quite implicit. For most couples the first birth was clearly based on their own choice, but there was not much thinking, reflection, long-term planning or communication involved with the decision to have a first child. This is true not only for those couples who had their first child at a relatively young age, but, perhaps more surprisingly, also for many of the older, mainly highly educated, couples. A difference between the two groups is that among older parents the decision-making about having children consisted more often of two steps: first the couples decided to have children, and in a later stage of the relationship the timing was decided upon. Hence older parents more often explicitly assured themselves

of their partner's wish for a child early in the relationship than young parents, while young couples agreed implicitly more often on having children. This probably implies that older parents found having children less self-evident than young parents. Although such a conversation at the beginning of the relationship is an indication of explicit decision-making, it does not involve extensive communication, discussion or negotiation.

To the extent that deliberate thinking about having children occurred, it was more common among the older parents. Some of them had some doubts about having children either when they were still single or after having met their partner. However, such thinking was always an individual issue; even when the partners of these doubters knew about their reservations, it did not result in extensive communication or negotiation.

Despite the lack of extensive communication, all respondents who planned their children placed much emphasis on the importance of both partners' consent before trying to have a child. Some of our couples' stories nicely illustrate the potential processes that are caused by this veto power principle. On the one hand it can lead to separation if the disagreement about having children seems to be irreconcilable. On the other hand it can result in years of waiting by one of the partners, either silently or by repeatedly making clear that the biological clock is ticking, until the other partner has solved his or her doubts or realizes that it is "now or never". This illustrates how partners' linked lives influence fertility decision-making. Of course veto power might also result in forgoing one's desire for a child and staying with a partner who does not want children. Such couples without children were not in our sample, but some partners of "doubters" in our study said that they would also have accepted it if their partner had eventually not wanted children.

Whereas veto power can cause postponement of having children or even union dissolution, some men and women are quite indifferent towards having children and are easily convinced if their partner wants to have children. This seems to go against the notion that "decision to become a parent is one of the most complex lifetime judgments that individuals or couples are called upon" (Hobcraft and Kiernan 1995). An explanation might be that for these men and women the relationship with their partner is so important that they do not want to deny their partner's wish for having children.

With regard to arguments and motives that are important during the decision-making process on whether and when to have a first child, we found interesting patterns concerning anticipated loss of freedom, and with regard to careers. Characteristic for some older parents is reluctance towards the limitation of freedom, adjustment of lifestyle and responsibilities that they expected to come along with having children. More interesting however, is a contrasting tendency of not thinking at all about having children until one is ready to give up some freedom, usually after an "extended" period

in which life was full of other things, such as study, career, friends, going out, or exotic travel. In such cases the costs related to loss of freedom seem to have influenced the timing of the first birth, but these are not deliberately considered, or at least not until such costs are not perceived to be important anymore. No gender differences were found here.

Similarly, some highly educated parents, men and women alike, emphasized that study and career had nothing to do with their decision-making on having children. These parents did not consciously plan the birth of their child in relation to their career because they did not start thinking seriously about having children until they had finished their studies and worked at least for a few years. This probably reflects how self-evident it is for a certain part of highly educated people to postpone children until after one has entered on or even made one's career. This is not to say that no one experiences a dilemma between work and having children or deliberately plans the first child in relation to study or career. Some do so, particularly women. This shows that different processes can underlie quantitatively demonstrated relationships such as the effect of education on postponement of the first birth: some deliberately postpone their child, others just do not think of having children. This seems to be in accordance with the finding by Wijsen (2002) that women who had their first child after age 30 do not report more intentional postponement than women who had their first child before age 30. In both groups of mothers in Wijsen's study about 50% report intentional postponement.

Characteristic of young parents is not bothering about the potential limitation to one's freedom due to childbirth. They either anticipate continuing to live life as they used too with few adjustments or do not mind being more bounded, the more so if they are not so much interested in self-fulfilment in other areas than parenthood. Sometimes this absence of worries about loss of freedom goes together with absence of worries about practical arrangements, like finances or work and care logistics. These couples emphasize mainly how much they looked forward to the joy of having children. Especially young mothers had a strong wish for children since growing up.

An advantage of this study is that we interviewed both partners in a couple, which made the stories about the decision-making process more inclusive. It made clear that a couple's decision process is often a shared experience, but that it can also consist of two rather individual yet interdependent processes if one partner has made up his or her mind earlier than the other. Another special feature of our study is the focus on couples that had their first child either earlier or later than average. This way we expected to find the most variety in the decision-making process. We indeed found differences in decision-making patterns, but overall we found that not only deciding to enter parenthood early, but also postponing the birth of the first child, may be quite an implicit process. Hence we emphasize that our study suggests that a first birth is not

typically preceded by an extensive and explicit decision-making process as sketched in theories on individualisation and lifestyle choices.

This theoretical perspective was our starting point, but our study also forms an interesting extension to demographic literature on fertility, which also tends to assume that births are preceded by deliberate decision-making. We found, for instance, that costs and rewards are not always deliberately considered. For many people who do have children, the choice to have them might have been self-evident, and the planning of the first child does not have to be experienced as a complex process influenced by many factors, not even if the first child arrives years later than average. We think this deserves to be highlighted, amidst all the attention, scholarly as well as in the media, to the complexity of the choice for children and the dilemmas surrounding it (Gerson 1985; Van Luijn 1996; Raad voor de Volksgezondheid en Zorg 2007). Complex decision-making on having children does not seem to be a general pattern; quantitative research, however, can shed more light on the frequency of different decision-making patterns among parents to be.

One consideration might be that we have detected a typically Dutch phenomenon, partly reflecting the easiness of combining part-time work with having children for women and (still) relatively high wages earned by men (Rijken and Knijn 2008). Perhaps in countries where the choice whether or not to have children for women implies the choice between fulltime employment or fulltime motherhood, decision-making is harder. Cross-national comparative research could give more insight into such issues.

A drawback of our study is the retrospective nature of the interviews. This is however inevitable if one wants to study a process of which the outcome (whether and when the child is born) is known. We tried to contain this problem by using a life history timeline, by chronologically structuring the interview and by emphasizing time references in the questioning. Yet, studies of couples that are in the midst of the decision-making process of having children could form an addition to our study. In addition, more explicit decision-making might have occurred among people who chose not to have children (see Cooper, Cumber, and Hartner (1978) and Carmichael and Whittaker (2007) for studies on the decision to remain childless). Finally, it would be interesting to examine in what ways decision-making on second, third and subsequent children differs from decision-making on first children, and how entering parenthood early or late influences subsequent childbearing decision-making. For instance, parents who decided upon having a first and second child quite implicitly might explicitly deliberate and discuss having a third child; having a third child may be considered less self-evident and rational considerations about costs might play a larger role. Parents who hesitated very long on whether or not to have a first child may have no doubts at all about further children, for example, because they do not want their first-born to be

an only child, or because they have experienced so much joy with the first child. Our interviews are also suitable for studying such issues.

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