

# **Couples' decisions on having a first child: Comparing pathways to early and late parenthood**

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## **Abstract**

Starting from theories on reflexive individualization in modern societies, with a focus on deliberate life choices, long term-planning and negotiating partnerships, we investigate the nature of couples' decision making processes on having a first child. We use semi-structured interviews with 33 couples, selected from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study and compared couples who entered parenthood at a relatively young age with those who did at a relatively old age. We expected more explicit decision-making among postponers and differences in motives and arguments between the two groups. Our qualitative analyses show that the decision-making preceding first childbirth is often implicit, also among postponers. Disagreement between partners does not necessarily lead to discussion. Factors that are known to result in postponement of childbearing, like higher education, do not always play a conscious role in people's decision-making.

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## 1 Introduction

In Western societies, having children is nowadays a matter of *if* and *when* for most people. The disconnect between having a sexual relationship and having children has resulted in lifestyle choices (Giddens, 1991) that never have 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 & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002, p. 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 & 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 democratized and he refers to democratized 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, p. 192).

Not only is it a common sense idea that having children usually is a choice, about which partners preferably reach agreement, but 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: “So what is thought of as a situation requiring a decision often turns into a long-drawn-out process” (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, p. 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, and communication or discussion between partners. This decision process does not get much attention in empirical studies on fertility yet, since 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 by linking childbearing intentions to behaviour or by 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 more appropriate.

Studies on the decision to have children usually only included either women (Den Bandt, 1982; Gerson, 1985; Van Luijn, 1994; Bernardi, 2005; Sevón, 2005) or, to a much lesser extent, men (Jacobs, 1995; Von der Lippe & Fuhrer, 2004; Knijn, et al., 2006). We included both parents 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 who had their first child at a relatively old age with couples who had their first child at a relatively young age.<sup>1</sup> We assume that having a child is always preceded by decision-making, whether couples have given it much thought and discussion or not, and whether they reached consensus or not. The leading question of this article therefore is:

*What is the nature of the decision-making process on 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 (a) to what extent the decisions have been taken implicitly or explicitly (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989) – therefore we will focus on deliberations on the decision by each partner and the communication between them – and (b) 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 top 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, it is likely that people do not have equal abilities to engage in a reflexive biography (Mills, 2007) and we expect that postponed entry into parenthood is

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<sup>1</sup> We restrict ourselves to first births in this study, because it is likely that the nature of the decision-making on first, second and higher-order children is different. Although decisions of young and old parents on higher-order births might also diverge in interesting ways, we expect the differences on the decision on the first child to be most prominent.

preceded by more extensive decision-making, more long-term planning and more discussion than young entry into parenthood.

Pathways into parenthood evidently encompass many facets, from background characteristics, partnership histories and early child wishes to the joined decision-making process within the partnership. This article will touch 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 Study, 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 section 3.1 for age definitions). The interviews were held in 2006 and 2007.

## **2 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 keep the baby.

Giddens (1991, 1992), Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim (Beck, 1992; Beck & 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”, “democratic partnerships”. However, their theoretical ideas were not aimed directly at conducting empirical research, so for the purpose of our study these ideas have to be translated into more concrete concepts, specifically related to childbearing decisions. In our interpretation, their ideas suggest that men and women individually think 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, 1998); they are mutually dependent and therefore have to balance their own deliberations with their partners. Hence the decision-making process happens 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 are supposed to 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. To summarize, the theoretical view of Giddens, Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim on choices and partner interaction suggests that births are nowadays preceded by explicit decision-making which is characterized by thought, planning and communication between partners.

Previous empirical (qualitative) research on another couple issue, namely the division of household tasks and paid labour, shows that decision-making on this topic is quite implicit (Evertsson & Nyman, 2008; Wiesmann, Boeije, Van Doorne Huisjes, & Den Dulk, 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 for a long time. Moreover, entering parenthood arguably involves the most profound change in an individual's life course (Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995), therefore more explicit deliberations might be expected here. Yet, a reason for non-communication on having children could be that partners think they agree without making sure that that is the case. They might believe that once they're married, having children will be self-evident. If partners indeed agree without deliberations, they have reached spontaneous consensus (Scanzoni & Szinovacz, 1980). However, there might also be silent arrangements when partners have different wishes (Scanzoni & 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 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 et al., 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 & 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 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 & Wolfe, 1960). Influence also can be based on spheres of interest; because of gender patterns, children still are 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 et al., 1990; Thomson, 1997; Thomson & 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, Hope, Townes, & Campbell, 1982; Miller & Pasta, 1996; Thomson, 1997; Thomson & 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 & Van de Kaa, 1986; Van de Kaa, 1987; Lesthaeghe, 1995), or by more specific norms such as family norms on ideal family sizes (Axinn et al., 1994) and ideal ages to have children (Steenhof & 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 & Waite, 1993; Myers 1997; Rijken and Liefbroer, in press), since children represent a large investment in the relationship and having children might benefit or harm the quality of the relationship. Besides, the quality of the partner relationship is important for the well-being of potential children. Besides studies that directly link factors such as the above-mentioned to childbearing, 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 ones and opportunity costs related to career loss. 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.

### **3 Methods**

#### **3.1 Sample selection**

The 33 couples that participated in this study were selected from the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra et al., 2005), a large-scale nationally representative survey among 8161 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 a first child for each partner). As we were interested in couples who had their first child either at a relatively young or a relatively old 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.<sup>2</sup> The response rate was negatively influenced by the fact that both partners had to be willing to participate (women were more often willing than 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.

### **3.2 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) signalled “his and her marriage”: partners may experience the same marriage in a different way, hence they may also experience the decision-making about their first child differently. Besides, an 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 et al., 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 & 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 these questionnaire respondents were asked about their personal 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 house moving (migration), to create a simplified form of a “life history calendar” (Freedman, Thornton, Camburn, & Young-DeMarco, 1988).

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<sup>2</sup> 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’.



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 interaction interview (Scanzoni & Szinovacz, 1980). First, respondents were asked to tell something about the family they grew up in, then it was discussed 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 on having children within the current relationship, and we asked about deliberations, agreeing or disagreeing ideas, communication, negotiation etc. 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 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 of 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 respondent's home, and completing the questionnaire and the interaction interview took on average two hours. All interviews were recorded electronically, fully transcribed and read to get broadly acquainted 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.

### **3.3 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 average. The older mothers and fathers entered

parenthood when they were aged respectively 35.1 and 37.6 on 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 the and 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 section 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 has 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 attends 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 protestant orthodox 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 cohabited or were 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 – usually within a few months – after the couple stopped using contraceptives (or started sexual intercourse in the case of very religious couples).

To summarize: the young couples met each other at a much younger age, have lower educational levels or are more strictly religious than the older parents. Does this imply that they also deliberated differently about the decision to have a child?

#### **4 Child wishes**

“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 & Szinovacz, 1980), we asked respondents about the – possibly changing – 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 men and women were once sure that they would not want to have children at all. Many current parents used to have a latent child wish: they had never imagined themselves staying childless, but did not give the issue much thought when they were younger. Some claim they really did not give having children any thought at all for a long time, like 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 says 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 had a strong child wish, while the child wishes of young men and older mothers and fathers varied more. Young mothers also stand out in the sense that as teenagers they knew that they wanted to be a young mother (although exact ideal ages were not mentioned), while this was not mentioned so often by young fathers.

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

Finally, many women talked more extensively about the child wishes 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, p. 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 I 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”. In contrast to Townsend, some men we talked to had a strong child wish 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<sup>3</sup> 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.

## **5 Implicit and explicit decision-making**

### **5.1 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 decide that they want to have children, and then, usually at a later stage of the relationship, the timing of the first child is 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 child wish in the beginning of the relationship by explicitly asking about it somewhere in the first year of the relationship and 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 child wish and for them it was a relationship prerequisite to have an agreement on having children – the more so if they had left their previous partners because they did not want to have children.

None of the couples who 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

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<sup>3</sup> For reasons of privacy, the names of the respondents in this article are fictitious.

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 couples who made it clear from the start that they only wanted to get serious if their partner also wanted 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 child wish themselves, asserted that they had never given any thought to having children until their partner started talking about it, and 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 though. For these couples, marriage self-evidently brings children.

The story can also be really 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”, as 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; Irene and Robert, aged 38 and 47 at first childbirth; and Peter and Kim, who became parents at ages 34 and 37:

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.

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.

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.

At first glance, these couples' stories seem to be characterized by latent power mechanisms (Komter, 1989). They did not explicitly talk about their child wishes nor agreed that they would try to have children some day. Implicitly, the partners knew each other's divergent child wishes, 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 taken 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 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 thought 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 more quiet, 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 child wish 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 by the fact that both couples had decided not to get 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.

## **5.2 Timing of the first child**

As mentioned before, most couples agreed early in their relationship on having children. The majority of young couples had implicitly (and rightly) assumed or sensed this, and the majority of older parents had explicitly talked about 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<sup>4</sup> – 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 the 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 become a parent. 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 if this man would not take the decision deliberately, he also could not regret it.

And 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.

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<sup>4</sup> For those couples who did not talk and sometimes did not even think about having children until they were going 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.

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 finished an evening education, no long time paths were planned. Among the young couples timing is 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 most of the young parents who had their first child some years after they met, did not talk about having children before cohabitation either. Sometimes the issue was not raised until after marriage, when the woman proposed to stop using the pill.

In addition, from most stories it became clear 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 (see page 1), quite a number 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.

To summarize: generally there was not much long-term planning or communication involved with the decision to have a first child among the young and older couples we interviewed. A difference between the two groups is that the older parents explicitly assured themselves more often of the partner's child wish early in the relationship than the young parents. This is a sign of explicit decision-making, but it does not involve extensive communication. Besides planning and communication, deliberate thinking is also an aspect of explicit decision-making

(Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). Among our interviewees, this happened much less than theories on individualisation assume, which is made clear by the following fragment, in which David reacts to the interview as such:

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...

To the extent that deliberate thinking about having children did happen, it was more common among the older parents and usually an individual issue.

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 & Hoem, 1998) – in other words, each person only wanted a child with their partner's consent or after giving consent.<sup>5</sup> This clearly emerges from the stories we discussed, in which one of the partners was ready for children sooner than the other and either waited patiently and silently or actively tried to convince their partner, but a "double veto power or double consent norm" is also expressed by other couples who themselves did not have divergent ideas on having children. Finally, a difference in decision-making between young and old parents that has not come up yet concerns practical issues related to having children, such as work and child care 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, like Mark:

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:

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<sup>5</sup> For men whose partner got 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.

Naomi: 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.

## **6 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 who are unhappy with their relationship might have children to improve the relationship is recognized; some couples even mentioned examples of this, 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 deviates 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 mentions 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 (Statistics Netherlands, 2003, 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 make a far journey 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 buggy, I thought: My God, what are you doing? Life has just started and you’re already pushing a baby buggy.

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 one's 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 pretty mindlessly 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, despite 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 cannot 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.

With regard to the role of study, work and career in decision-making among older parents we see a similar pattern. 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 indicate that they wanted to continue working after the birth of their first child, but describe themselves as not career-oriented and work part-time, 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 a special situation, e.g. following evening education besides a job, or referred 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 over one in four postponing women did (own analyses).

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 the children ahead. Although the fact that they were studying or starting a career might have been a reason for not thinking about

children earlier,<sup>6</sup> 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, and says she used to be very 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.

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” (couple level) about what was important to them emerged. One might expect that divergence in what one 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

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<sup>6</sup> 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.

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.

## **7 Conclusion**

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 and when. Authors like Giddens (1991, 1992), Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim (Beck 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 1995, 2002) 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. 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. We focused on the extent to which the decision-making process was explicit or implicit (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989) and on the motives and arguments that were important to people. Whereas Giddens, Beck, and Beck-Gernsheim describe explicit decision-making as a central characteristic of individuals and couples of our times, we compared couples who had their first child at a relatively young age with couples who did so at a relatively old age in order to detect possibly contrasting decision-making patterns; we expected more extensive and explicit decision-making processes among couples who had their first child relatively late.

The older parents typically met each other at a later age than the younger parents, and waited longer with having children within the relationship, although the dominant pattern among young couples was to have the first child at least 5 years after the offset of the relationship. Young mothers typically reported to have had strong child wishes since they were young, the child wishes of young fathers and older mothers and fathers varied.

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 long-

term planning – whether individually or by couples – and not much 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 decide to have children, and in a later stage of the relationship the timing is decided upon. Hence older parents assured themselves explicitly more often of their partner's child wish 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.

Communication and proactive planning are not the only characteristics of explicit decision-making though. Thought and reflection is another aspect of explicit decision-making (Sillars & Kalbflesch, 1989). In general, such deliberate thinking on having children happened much less than theories on individualisation and life choices assume. To the extent that deliberate thinking about having children did happen, it was more common among the older parents. Some of them did have 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. Yet, for most of the older parents, having children was just not an issue that was on their mind during most of the years that they “waited” with having children.

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; it can lead to separation if the disagreement about having children seems to be irreconcilable, but also 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 the veto power might also result in forgoing one's child wish 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.

With regard to arguments and motives that were 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 the older parents is either a reluctance towards the limitation of freedom, adjustment of lifestyle and responsibilities that one expected to come along with children, or not thinking about having children at all 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 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 higher educated parents, men and women alike, emphasized that study and career had nothing to do with their decision-making on having children – they 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 (higher educated) people to postpone children until after one has entered on or even made one’s career. However, experiencing a dilemma between work and having children or deliberately planning the first child in relation to study or career does also occur, especially among 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.

Characteristic for young parents is not bothering about the potential limitation to one’s freedom due to childbirth. This can be because they anticipate continuing to live life as they used too with few adjustments. Another reason is that they 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. In their stories, these couples emphasized more how much they looked forward to the joy of having children. Especially young mothers had a strong child wish 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 who 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 conclude by emphasizing 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, 1994; Raad voor de Volksgezondheid en Zorg, 2007). This does not seem to be a general pattern; quantitative research, however, can shed more light on the frequency of different decision-making patterns.

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 is known (whether and when the child is born). 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 who are in the midst of the decision-making process on 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. Our interviews are also suitable for studying these questions.

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