J Fam Econ Iss (2016) 37:540–552
DOI 10.1007/s10834-015-9474-z

ORIGINAL PAPER

Missing Out on the Parenthood Bonus? Voluntarily Childless in a "Child-friendly" Society

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Published online: 13 November 2015

Abstract This article draws on interviews with Swedish voluntarily childless women and men in order to discuss their understandings of living in a so-called "child-friendly" welfare society where social policies subsidize families with children. Previous research from Anglo-Saxon countries implies that the social, political and economical interests of the voluntarily childless are in conflict with the interests of parents and that state subsidies and policies in support of parents could be considered as discrimination of childless people. However, in contrast to this previous research, the interviewees did not object to the redistributive tax system that benefits parents or to the political ambition to build a "child-friendly" labour market where it is possible to reconcile work with parenthood. Instead they defended themselves against accusations for being "free-riders" who did not contribute to society by referring to the responsibility they took by paying high taxes. Notwithstanding, the informants criticized how some parents misused their benefits and cashed in on them, making the voluntarily childless feel exploited. The article also suggests that state subsidies can eliminate some motives for voluntary childlessness but not all of them. The results add nuances to previous research as they highlight the importance of further investigating the relations between parents and non-parents in a social and political context.

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Keywords Voluntary childlessness · Parenthood bonus · Social policies · Sweden · Redistributive tax system · Workplace policies

Introduction

Politicians, researchers, demographers, and journalists have construed the current extremely low birth rates throughout the Western, industrialized world, the Middle East and the East Asia, as a serious societal, economical and political problem (Andersson 2002; Boling 1998; Douglass et al. 2005; Esping-Andersen 2011; Rowland 2007; Sobotka 2004). The downtrend in fertility since the late 1960s has states worrying about what is understood as an economically not sustainable population size (Macinnes 2006). Some of the feared consequences of this so called global "baby bust" are welfare systems increasingly burdened by the health and care needs of an aging population, collapsing public pensions systems and reduced technological innovation and economic growth (Longman 2004).

Behind this demographic trend are falling birth rates and the postponement of family formation (Thévenon and Gauthier 2011). The declining fertility is often interpreted in terms of the occupational and financial risks associated with parenting in our society (Feyrer et al. 2008; Nauk 2007). The so-called opportunity costs of childbearing is described as being too high, involving for example a negative impact on parents' position in the labour market (Mitchell and Gray 2007; Molina and Montuenga 2009). The political solutions to the perceived problem with low birth rates have consequently been to implement a "parenthood bonus"—in the shape of for example family subsidies, tax breaks and state-sponsored childcare (Baker 2010; Bennett 2006; Lister 2006; Rich et al. 2011). Japan, a

country with one of the fastest aging populations in the world, has for example implemented a range of family-friendly programmes since the mid 1990s to encourage people to have more children (Boling 2008). In Sweden, benefits such as a generous paid parental leave (a total of 480 days per child), public child allowance, reimbursement for care of sick children, free child health care and a highly subsidized high-quality public child care are examples of the political commitment, fundamental to the welfare system, to create a "child-friendly society" (Ds 2001:57; Haavind and Magnusson 2005; Lister 2009; Nyberg 2012; Söderlind and Engwall 2008).

Previous research has investigated how a parenthood bonus to some degree relieves anxieties and eliminates burdens that keep people from wanting and having children and therefore influencing decisions about becoming parents or about family-size (Dribe and Stanfors 2009; Ellingsæter and Leira 2006; Hoem 1993; Roman and Peterson 2011; van Lancker and Ghysels 2012). This article adopts a different approach to the question about citizens' responses to policy interventions aimed at supporting parents and encouraging more births. The focus lies here on a group of people who rejects parenthood altogether—women and men who are childless by choice. The article explores if, how, and to what extent family-friendly policies impact (or do not impact) the lives of voluntarily childless women and men. By doing this the article addresses recent studies' call for more research that take the national context into account when researching voluntary childlessness (cf. Avison and Furnham 2015; Tanaka and Johnson 2014).

The article is structured as followed. The next section presents previous research and the theoretical framework. The subsequent section describes the empirical data and the methodological considerations. After that the findings are presented and analysed. The article ends with a concluding discussion.

Previous Research

Voluntary childlessness is one of several related fertility patterns, such as postponement of children and reduced number of children born to women over their lifetimes, that together constitutes the so called second demographic transition (Thévenon and Gauthier 2011). Several contributing factors have been mentioned to explain these patterns: urbanization resulting in the decreasing economic rewards for parents with many children; widespread use of, and access to, efficient methods of family limitation; and women's economic and social independence through increased workforce participation (Brewster and Rindfuss 2000; Longman 2004; Van Doorne-Huiskes and Doorten 2011). Most studies predict that the voluntarily childless population will continue to increase due to social, cultural and economic changes (Abma and Martinez 2006; Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Albertini and Mencarini 2014; McAllister and Clarke 2000; Rowland 2007).[1]

Freedom to pursue professional possibilities has often been referred to as one of the main reasons for women's decisions to forgo children (cf. e.g., Abma and Martinez 2006; Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Houseknecht 1987; Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell 2007; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008; Veevers 1979). Some voluntarily childless women seem to understand parenthood as more problematic in relation to working life than mothers or women who want children (Park 2005) and they hence feel "forced to make tough choices between reproductive and career goals" (Kemkes-Grottenthaler 2003, p. 214). Research confirms that women's fears concerning the negative effects of motherhood on employment, earnings, career and work/life balance are well founded (Lister 2009; Maume 2006; Roman and Peterson 2011). While women who mother have been said to suffer the negative consequences of the so called "motherhood wage penalty" on the labour market, permanent childlessness has been associated with strong socio-economic positions for women (Dykstra and Hagestad 2007; Lips and Lawson 2009). For men, these economic factors do not inhibit them from having children (Waren and Pals 2013). Instead, the opposite pattern holds true for men; those with children have stronger economic positions than those who have remained childless (Glauber 2008; Kaufman and Uhlenberg 2000; Keizer et al. 2009; Lundberg and Rose 2002). Men who father are thus said to enjoy the positive consequences of the "fatherhood premium," referring to that men's wages increase after they become fathers (Gibb et al. 2014; Hodges and Budig 2010; Kennerberg 2007). While mothers reduce their working hours, fathers often take on the role of the provider and increase their breadwinning capacity by working more hours than non-fathers (Christiansen and Palkovitz 2001; Lindström 2013; Stanfors 2006). The Swedish welfare society has targeted these gendered outcomes of parenting through dual-earner and dual-carer policies that support less traditional gender roles and gender equal parenting (Korpi et al. 2013). Sweden was for example the first

[1] It is not possible to differentiate between voluntarily and involuntarily childless status in demographic statistics but because childlessness has increased it is assumed that the number of voluntarily childless individuals has increased proportionally (Roy et al. 2014). Generally, the proportion of voluntarily childless women has been estimated to between 4 to 7 % (slightly higher for men) of the 1960 cohort in Western, industrialized countries such as Sweden, Italy and the US (Persson 2010; Tanaka and Johnson 2014; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). Most articles dealing with voluntary childlessness, published in English-language journals, investigate the phenomenon in Western, industrialized countries making it difficult to find statistics concerning other parts of the world.

country in Europe to introduce parental leave for both mothers and fathers (van Doorne-Huiskes and Doorten 2011).

The voluntarily childless in the US have argued that political decisions about supporting parents through redistributive tax systems exploit and ignore the interests of voluntarily childless and are therefore discriminating and unfair (Fjell 2009). Taylor (2003, p. 49) has suggested that the "dissident voice of those without children has been growing louder" in the US as the politicians' attention to policies supporting family-friendly workplaces have increased in recent years. The voluntarily childless have raised their voices to ask what is in such policies for them and accused the state of a lack of neutrality. According to Taylor (2003) the voluntarily childless have drawn on the rhetoric of choice, and argued that child rearing is one of several different lifestyle choices. Family-friendly workplace policies, and tax policies that benefit parents, have therefore been interpreted as unfair and unnecessary because they simultaneously exploit and ignore the interests of voluntarily childless. The voluntarily childless in Anglo-Saxon countries have been portrayed as constituting a controversial and well-organized group visible in media, where they express their discontent with state support of parents while parents reply by criticizing voluntarily childless people for being irresponsible "free riders" and "child-haters" (Fjell 2009; Giles et al. 2009).

Surprisingly, considering the tangible state-provided assistance to families, public debates in media like these have been more or less entirely absent in Sweden (Peterson 2014a). Rijken and Merz (2014) found a possible explanation for this as their study showed that voluntary childlessness is less disapproved of in countries with a high level of gender equality, among them Sweden. In countries such as these the high cost of children for women is recognized and women's choice to pursue a professional career better understood and supported. Similarly, according to Tanaka and Johnson (2014), Sweden is a nation characterized by a low proportion of people believing motherhood necessary for a woman—something that often correlates with childless people being happier and more satisfied than in other countries. In addition, although political debates do exist, the Swedish redistributive tax system seems well established and the parenthood bonus mostly undisputed in public debate (Kulin and Svallfors 2013; Söderlind 2005).

Although previous research has highlighted the links between reproductive decisions and the social, economic and political preconditions, little attention has been devoted to exploring the experiences of voluntarily childless adults that live in societies with a welfare structure that encourages and supports childbearing (Agrillo and Nelini 2008; Kelly 2009) (and perhaps also subsequently even condemns childlessness) (Douglass et al. 2005).

The aim of this article is to contribute with new knowledge on how voluntarily childless adults experience and understand the parenthood bonus. More specifically it addresses the following research questions: How do voluntarily childless women and men in Sweden understand and experience the parenthood bonus (state subsidies and family policies in support of parents)? How do voluntarily childless women and men understand the meaning and value of being a parent versus a childless citizen within a specific social, cultural and political-economic system that rewards childbearing? How do voluntarily childless women and men understand the "problem" (defined as such by social media, public figures, officials and politicians) of low fertility?

Empirical Material and Methodological Considerations

This article draws on the first two research studies on voluntary childlessness in Sweden, carried out separately by the article's two authors. The two studies were qualitative in nature and based on semi-structured interviews with a total of 36 voluntarily childless women and men. Although the two interview studies were part of two separate research projects, they posed similar questions and adopted the same methodological approaches in order to answer these questions. The main objective of both studies was to explore voluntary childlessness in contemporary Sweden, focusing on several main themes: voluntarily childless adults' motives for the decision to remain childless; their experiences of attitudes and stereotypes towards them; their relationships with partners, friends, parents, colleagues and children; and, choices concerning contraception and sterilization. Though both authors also analysed their results separately the joint interpretation sessions during regular face-to-face meetings carried out while working on this article resulted in key concepts, codes and categories being developed and thoroughly discussed, which produced new insights and added to the validity of the analyses.

In 2008–2009, the first author interviewed 21 voluntarily childless women (interviews with women 1–21). Between 2005 and 2009, the second author interviewed nine Swedish voluntarily childless women (interviews with women 22–30) and six men (interviews with men 1–6). At the time of the interviews, 23 of the women were in their thirties-forties, three in their fifties and four in their sixties. All of the women were heterosexual. Fifteen were single; nine were cohabiting with a man and two married. Four of the women lived in long-term relationships with a man without sharing household with them. Most of the women had earlier in life been married or cohabited with a man.

Five of the men were between 30 and 40 years old and living together with a woman. One man was over 50 years old and lived in a registered partnership with a man. Most previous research has been based on married couples and intentionally excluded single women, although being unmarried is one of the strongest predicators of childlessness (Lee and Zvonkovic 2014; Mulder 2003). As in many previous studies on voluntary childlessness (Persson 2010; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008; Veevers 1979) all of our informants, but one, lived in larger urban areas although many had moved there from the countryside or smaller communities. The spread was greater in terms of education and occupation: doctor, artist, author, engineer, nurse, project leader, preschool teacher and speech therapist are some examples.

We came in contact with twelve of the interviewees through an online network for voluntarily childless women. Five of the informants were contacted after they appeared in media where they shared their experiences of being voluntarily childless. Three of the interviewees contacted us themselves after learning of our research through media or online. Finally, the remaining sixteen informants were recruited using snowball techniques (Browne 2005).

Four of the interviews were conducted as telephone interviews in order to overcome large geographical distances. For practical reasons three women answered the interview questions in writing. They received the questions via e-mail and returned their replies in an electronic document within a week (Reid et al. 2008). All interviews produced detailed accounts of the interviewees' experiences (Holt 2010; Trier-Bieniek 2012). The semi-structured character of the interviews encouraged the informants to reflect on their experiences and to share them in an open manner (Scheibelhofer 2007). The interviews were recorded with one exception. One of the women asked not to be recorded, and the researcher instead took notes during this interview.

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study before the interviews were conducted. Their participation was also negotiated during the interviews as they could interrupt the interview at any point or refuse to reply to questions, something that was considered important as the subject of the interview could be considered sensitive (DePalma 2010). The informants were promised confidentiality, which means that detailed information about them, or their real names, will not be revealed (Bahn and Weatherill 2012).

The interviews were transcribed verbatim following guidelines about naturalness and authenticity (McLellan et al. 2003). A conventional, qualitative, content analysis was used, focusing on the meaning produced in the interviews (Hsieh and Shannon 2005). The analytical process started with the authors reading the transcriptions carefully in order to identify salient issues and noting response patterns for the questions. A range of techniques such as coding, categorization and theme formation was used in order to discover similarities and differences in perceptions and experiences (Ryan and Bernard 2003). As a final step, the authors consulted previous research in order to provide frameworks for analysis.

The section below presents the findings and is structured according to five different themes concerning living as a voluntarily childless in a child-friendly society. These themes were not a priori themes, generated from already existing categories or codes or specific questions in the interview guides. Instead, these themes emerged as prominent themes induced from the empirical data (cf. Ryan and Bernard 2003). The five subthemes are illustrated by selected quotes from the interviews, translated from Swedish to English by the authors.

Findings and Analysis

Opportunity Costs for Childbearing in a "Child-Friendly" Welfare Society

Surprisingly, in relation to the results in international studies (cf. e.g. Abma and Martinez 2006; Houseknecht 1987; Kemkes-Grottenthaler 2003; Mulder 2003; Park 2005; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008) career orientation was not a prominent theme in our interviews. Most women strongly objected to being career-oriented. Few of them mentioned work or career when they were asked what they gave priority to in their lives. An Anglo-Saxon study on voluntarily childless men (Lunneborg 1999) illustrated how also these men were dedicated to their professional careers. The Swedish men interviewed in this study seemed very content with their careers and enjoyed earning a high salary, while two also occupied management positions with a high degree of flexibility (Man 4; Man 5). Several of them described their jobs as fun and one man (Man 1) explained that he would not like to work part time even if he was given the opportunity. However, these men did not explain their voluntary childlessness with reference to their professional endeavours.

Notwithstanding the lack of career orientation, some of the answers concerning motivators for being childless by choice reflected the awareness of the existence of opportunity costs for children, also in a "child-friendly" welfare society. For some women, being voluntarily childless meant that they could escape the pressure of pursuing a career: "I'm free to make my own decisions, in all aspects of life. I don't have to keep a steady wage to support someone else. If I want to quit a job I quit" (Woman 6). This statement is reminiscent of the pressure of the sole breadwinner role, previously reserved for men (Terry and

Braun 2012). However, in a dual-carer and dual-earner society as the Swedish (Korpi et al. 2013), gender equal parenting also comes with expectations on equal sharing of the "good provider" role (Wager 2000).

The women also seemed aware of that the reality was far from gender equal and that motherhood negatively influenced women's position in the labour market. One of the women replied to the question about why she was voluntarily childless: "Something that has affected me a lot is the fact that it's so unequal. Women always have to take the blow when it comes to kids… Women are more discriminated against because of kids" (Woman 17). The woman here referred to the fact that Swedish women are absent from work due to care for sick children to a higher degree than men and that most men fail to take parental leave more than a couple of weeks, leaving the mother to financially "take the blow" (cf. Bernhardt et al. 2008; Kennerberg 2007; Lindström 2013; Nyberg 2012; Stanfors 2006). However, the lack of gender equality in this aspect was not understood as a problem caused by lack of policies (cf. Koslowski 2011). Instead the problem was located to the private sphere and the result of negotiations between the parents (cf. Roman and Peterson 2011). One of the women explained:

> As a woman… you're supposed to take care of the kids. Because men don't. Swedish men are better than other men but they are still not… you can't count on it. You can have a really gender equal relationship but when you become parents then you're suddenly faced with this "Gender Role!" (Woman 4)

Nonetheless, some suggestions to improve labour market policies in order to further support gender equality between parents were voiced. One of the women explained that she "certainly would never become a housewife" and that she was aware of that becoming parents put a previously gender equal relationship at risk "because we don't have individual parental insurance" (Woman 10). Such an individual parental insurance was believed to facilitate a more gender equal division of domestic tasks and childcare responsibilities in the couple relation (cf. Sundström and Duvander 2002). These arguments constitute the voluntarily childless position as a political and gendered position not so much in relation to public policies but in relation to the extent "men enter the private sphere and share the responsibility for care of home and children equally with their female partners" (Bernhardt et al. 2008, p. 275).

Discrimination in a "Parent-Friendly" Labour Market

Our informants acknowledged the difficulties parents experience when trying to reconcile parenting with their responsibilities at work, and that they deserved benefits in order to facilitate this reconciliation. However, despite their understanding of parent's situation, the informants resented the assumption that voluntarily childless did not have any need of spare time (Woman 22). They felt that they were expected to support parents by working longer hours and stay committed to work. The financial benefits such as over-time compensation that the voluntarily childless enjoyed because of their ability to pick up holiday and weekend shifts at work were recognized (Woman 26; Woman 30). Notwithstanding, they expressed irritation that their private sphere and leisure time was not respected. Several of the informants stated that their employer or colleagues frequently asked them or expected them to work over-time and work unsocial hours while the same expectations never were put on parents. Parents were never asked to make sacrifices like that, involving giving up their spare time for work. According to the informants, these expectations on the voluntarily childless to work over-time reflected a widely accepted assumption that voluntarily childless lack obligations outside of work and therefore easily can work extra hours if necessary:

> I'm single and I don't have children. That's why it's up to me to get the job done. Because "You don't have to go home now." No one says it to my face but they all assume it. "I'll leave now. I must pick up my kids from day care centre or from school." "No, I can't come today because I'm on sick leave with my kid." But things have to be done, customers are waiting and reports have to be written. And I'm the one that has to fix it all and it's very difficult. When they have small children it's always something, always excuses: "School is breaking-up today" or "Winter break starts today." (Woman 3)

Another woman described what she perceived as discriminating and provoking assumptions about childless employees:

> No one raises an eyebrow if a mother or a father rushes off at four o'clock because they have to pick up their kids from day care. But if I leave work early because I have a commitment, people question it: "What do you do that for? You don't have a life anyway?" (Woman 22)

One of the men spoke of the lack of understanding and respect for that the voluntarily childless also have obligations outside of work:

> It's very accepted to be absent from work due to children and that's great of course. But if you choose not to have children but still feel you want to have some leave from work to do something else, then it's not accepted. (Man 6)

Some of the informants also questioned the right for parents with children younger than seven years to work part time. Because it failed to include non-parents it was considered as an unfair benefit. These informants thus argued for work/family programs in the labour market that also included non-parents:

> There are other reasons for why you'd want to cut back on working hours than to stay home with children… I don't have any problem with that parents are allowed to do that but then you should be allowed to receive reimbursement if you want to stay at home and renovate your house or write a novel or whatever you want to do. (Woman 23)

Although our informants did not use the terminology they seemed to be arguing that this kind of state support to parents unfairly discriminates against non-parents as they cannot use formal benefits such as parental leave and part time work. They also objected to more informal benefits giving parents preferential treatment over the childless concerning arranging their schedule and selecting vacation time.

Taylor (2003) described family-friendly policies in the workplace as "enemy number one of the voluntary childless" (p. 54) and Veevers (1974) labelled them "blatantly pronatalist"[2] (p. 398). These previous studies have illustrated how the voluntarily childless argue that having and raising children is one lifestyle choice among many and should therefore not receive any particular subsidy. Instead, lifestyle choices ought to be paid for by the individual who makes the choice; the argument goes (cf. Fjell 2009). Our analysis illustrates that some of the Swedish informants also did adhere to this type of neoliberal choice rhetoric in relation to workplace policies about work/life balance.

Supporting the Redistributive Tax System

Although our informants drew on the neoliberal choice discourse, many of them supported the redistributive tax system. Discontentment with that taxes in Sweden in general are too high and too many was expressed, but being stuck with the current system they accepted to pay taxes aiming to support parents and children (Woman 22; Woman 23). One of the women contrasted her view on taxes with an international discourse among the voluntarily childless:

> I took part in these American or English chat groups and this was something that people were very upset about: "Oh, why should I be forced to pay tax?" But I think: "So what?" It's my nephew that I pay taxes for. They [the children] will be working at the nursing home when I end up there. That's what I pay taxes for. Other people have paid taxes for my education, for example. (Woman 30)

Another woman argued in a similar way and claimed that she gladly paid taxes to support parents and children because that meant contributing to something that would benefit her later. Paying taxes was viewed as a kind of "advance payment" for services she would be in need of later in her life (Woman 22).

The interviewees in this study hence did not object to the tax system being unfair. Instead they understood and respected the financial sacrifices that parents make for their children. The voluntarily childless accepted that they contributed to supporting families with children by paying taxes. Several of the informants pointed out how expensive it is to raise children and that the child benefit does not cover all of these costs (Woman 4; Man 1). It was therefore considered as unreasonable to argue that only parents should pay tax in order to fund, for example, the school system and that the voluntarily childless should be relieved of that because they did not utilize that part of the social services for any children of their own:

> That way of reasoning results in letting everyone pay their own expenses and of course it won't work because people can't afford that. I seriously doubt that they will be able to pay for schools and their children's education. Whatever the real cost is for children… it will never work. (Man 2)

Thus, the Swedish tax system, that distributes the costs for children upon everyone, parents and voluntarily childless alike, appears to be well established (cf. Bernhardt et al. 2008; Söderlind 2005). The voluntarily childless referred to solidarity and the importance of children for the future society in order to explain their willingness to contribute to the costs for children (Woman 25; Woman 27; Woman 29). Others referred to political ideology and convictions (Woman 27; Man 4).

However, despite the positive attitudes, some of the interviewees suggested that the way parents (mis)used their benefits was understood to have negative consequences for the voluntarily childless. One of the women objected to the institutionalized and acceptable practices that allowed parents to take advantage of the system and use loop holes to make sure that their parental leave days lasted as long as possible. These practices were particularly provocative in comparison to the attitudes towards groups of people in

[2] The term "pronatalism" is frequently used in literature on voluntary childlessness to explain the stereotypes surrounding voluntary childlessness and the negative attitudes that voluntarily childless women and men face (Houseknecht 1987; Koropeckyj-Cox and Pendell 2007; Meyers 2001; Park 2005; Peterson 2011).

more need of financial support: "people turn up their noses and scoff at the unemployment benefit or social assistance" (Woman 24). One of the men expressed similar concerns over the strategic use of parental leave:

> I don't mind paying taxes that sustain a system that supports those who choose to have children. But I think it's a shame that this is a system that also can be abused. There are people who do it for tactical reasons at times. Now when we had a recession, for example, suddenly a lot of my male colleagues have left for paternity leave. (Man 5)

Notwithstanding these objections to the way parental leave was misused, compared to the battering that exists in the US and the UK, where the voluntarily childless explicitly and openly object to funding the needs of parents and children, family policies and the redistributive tax system seems to be a marginal issue to debate for the voluntarily childless in Sweden (cf. Kulin and Svallfors 2013).

In comparison, Taylor (2003) has identified tax policy as one area under criticism from the voluntarily childless in North America. According to her, the voluntarily childless have argued that tax credits for children are inequitable as they force the voluntarily childless to shoulder more than their share while not benefitting the needy or poor. However, a British study showed how voluntarily childless couples expressed support for the tax system and were willing to pay taxes and in that way contribute to what was considered to be benefits for parents (McAllister and Clark 1998). The voluntarily childless in that British study particularly pointed out education as an important area to contribute to while they were more sceptical about supporting poor families or families with many children as these parents were considered to be irresponsible (McAllister and Clark 1998).

Being a Valuable Citizen in a "Child-Friendly" Society

Previous research has highlighted how voluntary childlessness is associated with several negative stereotypes (Houseknecht 1987; Veevers 1979). One of the most frequent of these stereotypes suggests that voluntarily childless people are selfish and egoistic (Letherby 2002). Particularly for women, voluntary childlessness is associated with disinterest in issues of altruistic and humanitarian nature and lack of concern for others (Rich et al. 2011). The underlying assumption here is that childrearing is the ultimate contribution to society (Taylor 2003). By having children the citizen contributes not only to the continued existence of their own family but also to the survival of the society. Children grow up and contribute to the welfare system that also the voluntarily childless will be in need of, as they grow older. The voluntarily childless are therefore portrayed as "free riders" that profit from the investments of others (Scheiwe 2003). While having children is associated with social responsibility, childlessness is linked to being carefree, indifferent and disinterested in social issues.

Several of the voluntarily childless in this study were aware of the accusations that they were considered selfish for not having children (Woman 2; Woman 3; Woman 4; Woman 6; Woman 9; Woman 14). This was an accusation that they strongly objected against. Instead they argued that they did make useful and important contributions to society:

> I don't accept that people consider me to be a burden to society just because I don't have children…. No one has ever told me personally that I'm a fucking parasite, but I know that attitude exists. I've seen it on various on-line forums… the attitude that you are a parasite if you don't have children… because we all have to contribute and so on. I don't agree with that. (Woman 22)

Just like this woman, few of the interviewed voluntarily childless had actually met someone who told them that they profited from society by not having children face to face. Instead, they were aware of the existence of these attitudes through on-line debates and media. Nonetheless, they took the accusations seriously and had elaborated and reflected replies, some with reference to the redistributive tax system, as mentioned above:

> I read on a blog… Someone was really upset, angry, at voluntarily childless people and thought that we just suck out the juicy part of what society has to offer without contributing anything at all ourselves…. I don't see it like that at all. I consider it to be the complete opposite. We really don't cost society anything. We just pay taxes. (Man 2)

Several of the informants emphasized how their voluntary childless lifestyle provided them with a stable financial situation. Some of the voluntarily childless couples could thus be defined as DINKs (Double Income, No Kids) (Fjell 2009). They were well paid and therefore paid a lot of tax: "I work a lot. I pay a lot of taxes that goes to child support and things like that" (Man 3). Another man argued in a similar way about that he did not burden the society with any costs: "I'm rarely sick. I don't have any kids. I'm the perfect citizen—just pouring money into the state [laughs]" (Man 2). By emphasizing their high incomes and that they as a result also paid a lot of taxes at the same time as they did not use any of the publicly funded social services provided by society, such as parental leave, the

voluntarily childless defended themselves against accusations that they were a burden to society because they did not have children.

The interviewees also refuted these accusations by highlighting other ways of taking responsibility and contributing to society, except by bringing up biological children of their own. Some were very much involved in the lives of children as godmothers to their friends' and relatives' children (Woman 19; Woman 22; Woman 25). Others were devoted to "giving back to society" by being involved in volunteer work (Woman 9; Woman 16) or by supporting their friends when in need (Man 5).

Re-defining the Fertility Problem

Another way of refuting the accusation that voluntarily childless fail to live up to the responsibility to contribute to society was to criticize the underlying assumption that childrearing was a contribution to society. The voluntarily childless for example questioned the real motives why people have children and emphasized that social responsibility rarely was referred to as a legitimate motive to have children: "Show me a woman who had a baby because she wanted to contribute to society and I will discuss this argument with her" (Woman 6). This line of reasoning allowed the voluntarily childless to turn the accusation about being selfish and egoistic against those who decided to become parents: "It's egoistic to want children. You want children because it gives you something. Someone that loves me unconditionally" (Woman 9). This is a way of framing the decision to become a parent as a completely private decision rather than a social issue about concerns for the continued existence of society.

The accusation that the voluntarily childless fail to contribute to society was also undermined through references to an already overpopulated world. One of the women exclaimed: "It's not like if we're pandas! If we were I might have had second thoughts about me not reproducing. But it's not like we're on the verge of extinction" (Woman 7). The overpopulated world became an argument in support of portraying the voluntarily childless, rather than the childbearing, as the responsible citizens, contributing to a long-term, sustainable society. Refuting the argument about childbearing as the most important contribution to society could also involve interpreting it as an expression of racism when stated in an already overpopulated world. One of the voluntarily childless men refuted low fertility as a problem:

> I'm in support of free immigration. I don't see the problem. This is an expression of a structural problem and a somewhat racist problem that can be solved easily if we want. (Man 4)

Another man expressed similar lines of thoughts: "It's not like there is a human deficiency in the world. People just need to be redistributed better across the globe. We don't need to produce new ones here" (Man 6). The problem with decreasing fertility in a society where the population grew older and in need of nursing and caring services, was acknowledged by most informants. However, that the solution was to produce more "Swedish" children was rejected as an expression of a racist and nationalistic debate. Instead, alternative or complementary solutions to a rise in birth rates were suggested:

> We do not need to populate the world. The world is just way too crowded already. There are many children in need of parents. And we can let families immigrate. But of course these won't be blond and blue-eyed children. No one admits that but this is the kind of argument that lurks beneath the surface. (Woman 3)

Although this way of reasoning may appear coarse, similar arguments appear in previous studies that have highlighted that when voluntarily childless people are portrayed as parasites in society there are often implicit assumptions about ethnicity involved (cf. Kligman 2005; Douglass et al. 2005). These discussions raise questions about who should be included into the society as a citizen. Reasoning along these lines easily ends in dubious and controversial assumptions about desirable citizens who need to have more children, while the fertility in groups of less desirable citizens need to be reduced (cf. Kligman 2005; Meyers 2001).

Concluding Discussion

This article identifies and explores five different aspects of the social-policy framework in the Swedish child-friendly society that impact the lives of voluntarily childless women and men in different ways. The five aspects concern:

1. Recognizing the opportunity costs for childbearing, also in a "child-friendly" welfare society.
2. Perceiving work-life balance as a problem in society, also for voluntarily childless employees.
3. Contributing to the parenthood bonus through taxes but disapproving of parents' misuse of their privileges.
4. Understanding the meaning and value of being a childless citizen within a specific social, cultural and political-economic system that rewards childbearing.
5. (Re)defining the "problem" (defined as such by social media, public figures, officials and politicians) of low fertility.

These aspects directly or indirectly influence the life satisfaction and subjective wellbeing of voluntarily

childless adults as they point to controversies between parents and non-parents, experiences of discrimination from state policies and feelings of mistreatment at work. Surprisingly few of the previous studies on voluntary childlessness target the relationships between parents and the voluntarily childless in our contemporary society. This article illustrates the importance of recognizing both potential controversies as well as supportive relations between parents and non-parents, as relevant for the wellbeing of both groups in society.

Although the analysis in this article is not based on cross-cultural research the results from the Swedish studies are contrasted and compared to international findings in order to understand how the experiences of voluntarily childless adults may vary between countries depending on the social, political and economic context. The analysis for example illustrates that the differences in attitudes among the voluntarily childless in the US and in Sweden can be interpreted in relation to differences in the political and financial systems. The willingness among the voluntarily childless interviewed in this study to share the financial burden of parents for their children can be interpreted in relation to the long tradition in Sweden to share the costs for children and that the redistributive tax system is well-established (cf. Kulin and Svallfors 2013; Söderlind 2005). None of the informants in this study questioned the fundamental idea that children are an important part of society and the future we all share (cf. Edelman 2004). However, they did problematize this idea in relation to thoughts about an overpopulated world. This is one aspect in which being voluntarily childless most strongly is constituted as a political choice.

We conclude that state subsidies eliminate some motives for voluntary childlessness but not all of them. Previous research shows that the incompatibility of the childrearing role with the wage work role for women is one of the main factors that explains increasing childlessness (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). However, in a child-friendly society these two roles are becoming more compatible which suggests that the number of voluntarily childless adults should drop. But because voluntary childlessness still persists there must clearly be other motives for remaining voluntarily childless. Establishing exactly which policies that can achieve an increase in fertility is beyond the scope of this paper. What can be concluded is that a wide range of motivators influences such a life decision as remaining childless, some of which are related to social, cultural, economical, political and gender-specific pre-conditions (Peterson 2014b; Peterson and Engwall 2013).

The article illustrates the importance of including a gendered analysis when investigating voluntary childlessness from a social, economical and political perspective. The subject of fertility, childlessness and child-care is inherently gendered, due to the fact that parenthood bonuses mainly target mothers, aiming to facilitate primarily mother's participation in the public sphere outside the home (cf. Bernhardt et al. 2008). It is also worth noting that the women interviewed constituted their voluntarily childless position not mainly in relation to discrimination of women on the labour market, but instead by referring to lack of gender equality in sharing the responsibilities in the private sphere. Locating lack of gender equality to the private sphere can be interpreted as an expression of the same rhetoric of choice that previously has been associated with arguments concerning voluntary childlessness (Taylor 2003). Other researchers have in a similar manner described how voluntarily childless men draw on a neoliberal discourse about choice and personal responsibility (Terry and Braun 2012). The informants in this study used the choice rhetoric when arguing that becoming a parent is one of several different lifestyle choices and that the employer should not put different expectations on parents than on childless employees.

The findings that the interviewees objected to parents who "abuse" the privileges of parenthood in the workplace can also be interpreted within this neoliberal choice discourse. More generally, the informants accepted and supported the parenthood bonus. The objections that they raised concern the way some parents take advantage of the benefits available to them and cash in on them in a way that makes the childless feel exploited. The problems with the child-friendly welfare system and social policies were thus explained by individual choices and decisions (cf. Peterson 2014b). Instead of locating problems within the policies themselves the informants attributed the responsibility for unfair consequences of these policies to the individual colleague or manager who misused them.

Although one of the first studies on voluntary childlessness emphasized the implications for social policies (cf. Veevers 1974), most research places voluntary childlessness within a private sphere or focuses on investigating different psychological aspects of the phenomenon (Agrillo and Nelini 2008). This article highlights the importance of investigating voluntarily childless adults' fertility decisions from a policy perspective. This is important especially as voluntary childlessness is estimated to continue to increase in most Western societies in the future. Adults that are childless by choice are sometimes understood as a very limited population and therefore politically irrelevant. However, it is estimated that childlessness amongst women born after 1970 is likely to range from 15 to 25 % in industrialised countries (Avison and Furnham 2015). The number of childless men is already close to 25 % in many countries, including Sweden (Persson 2010). These issues thus concern almost a quarter of the population in Western countries and need to be addressed to a larger extent both in

research and policy making. The questions explored in this article are therefore not only of scholarly interest. They are highly relevant as policy issues. One example of such an issue concerns the social policies available to childless older adults without the support of children (Rowland 2007).

The analysis in this article draws on a small qualitative study and the results are therefore exploratory and the analysis necessarily limited. The selection criteria used in order to recruit interviewees to the two studies can also be criticized for excluding individuals with more ambivalent attitudes towards childlessness and childbearing, the so called "transitional women," "late articulators," "postponers," or "passive decision makers" (Avison and Furnham 2015; Houseknecht 1987; Morell 2000; Veevers 1979).

Notwithstanding, the article contributes by including interviews with both women and men. However, due to the small number of informants, especially the small number of participating voluntarily childless men, it has not been possible to achieve a well-founded comparison between the experiences of voluntarily childless men and voluntarily childless women. Clearly, more research is needed, especially when it comes to including voluntarily childless men and their experiences.

Studies like this, however, do not attempt to be statistically valid or exhaustive about selecting proportionally from all groups of childless women and men. Also, the presentation in this article has focused on some of the most prominent themes in the interviews, which might give the impression that the informants shared views, attitudes and opinions to a greater extent than they actually did. There is no claim that the results in this article are possible to generalize to any special group of voluntarily childless. Instead, the study explores voluntary childlessness in a specific context to generate empirical findings, reflections and theoretical insights that can contribute to proposing new research questions to be further investigated.

The article contributes by highlighting the importance of further investigating relations between parents and non-parents in a social and political context. Another fruitful direction for future research is to explore how reconciliation between work and family/leisure activities can be achieved for all, not just parents with small children. Welfare states need to make sure that social policies are driven by concerns about gender equality and life satisfaction and general wellbeing for all citizens, not only parents. Further research on voluntarily childless people's perceptions of family friendly policies can help contribute with valuable insights on alternatives to existing policies that might benefit both parents and adults that are childless by choice. The relevance of other policy areas, besides child-friendly social policies, for voluntarily childless adults, need also to be investigated.

Acknowledgments The authors wish to thank the voluntarily childless women and men who made this research possible by their participation. The authors are indebted to the editor and the three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful and insightful comments on an earlier version of the article. Financial support from Forte: the Swedish Research Council for Health, Working Life and Welfare is gratefully acknowledged.

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