

Why and when choosing child-free life in Sweden? Reasons, influencing factors and personal and societal factors: Individual interviews during 2020–2021

Berit Höglund^{*}, Ingegerd Hildingsson

Department of Women's and Children's Health, Uppsala University, Uppsala, Sweden

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Child-free life
Choice
Decision
Freedom
Interviews

ABSTRACT

Objective: Few studies have examined a voluntarily child-free life in the Nordic countries. The aim of this study was to explore reasons, influencing factors, and personal and social factors in individuals who chose to lead a child-free life in Sweden.

Methods: Twenty-three individual interviews were conducted during 2020–2021, and data were analysed through thematic network analysis.

Results: The organising themes captured how the informants discovered pathways and managed social structures to feel certain in their decision to lead a child-free life. The informants highlighted freedom, independence and governing their own time in everyday life and acknowledged the younger generation as being more open-minded towards child-free individuals.

Conclusions: All the informants, who had chosen to lead a child-free life, were confident in their decision. They appreciated living in a country where it was possible to make this personal and important life choice independently. Further knowledge is needed about remaining child-free.

Introduction

A voluntarily child-free existence means abstaining from parenthood or having children. For hundreds of years, some women and men have chosen to be voluntarily child-free. This phenomenon has previously been explored in a few studies from the Nordic countries [1,2]. Internationally, studies from the United States have reported that fewer women and men opt to have or rear children than in the past. In 1976, 10 percent of women aged 40–44 years had never had a child [3,4], in 2002, 18 percent [4], and by 2006 that figure had risen to 20 percent [3]. Among men in the same age group, 23 percent were child-free in 2002 [5]. Child-free individuals consider their choice to be a positive one that deserves to be noticed and treated seriously [6]. However, the concept of voluntarily making the choice to lead a life free from children can be perceived as problematic. International studies have described it as an individual experience resulting from a complex situation and an extended process, rather than a choice between two clear, unambiguous alternatives [7,8].

Having children or not is a large and universal life issue that most people are forced to confront [6]. Furthermore, freedom from children

seems to affect individuals at an emotional level, involving deep-rooted notions about children and the meaning of life. Previous studies have reported that child-free individuals are often questioned and stigmatised [9,10]. Women have been found to endure significantly more pronatalism pressure from their surroundings than men [10]. A previous study highlighted how voluntarily child-free individuals handled their marginalised and stigmatised position, for instance by avoiding environments and situations where many children are gathered or where conversations focus around children [11]. From the Netherlands, Keizer et al. have reported that being child-free seems to be more common in cohabiting relationships than among married couples and that people not interested in parenthood often do not choose to marry [12].

There are some complications in defining the concept of being 'child-free'. Some studies suggest that child-free women should reach the end of their fertile period before they can be called child-free, as younger women can change their minds and become mothers later in life [13,14]. Likewise, one study has argued that to be considered child-free, a woman must not be so young that the permanence of their decision to abstain from having children can be questioned [15]. On the other hand, Abma and Gladys have argued that women should be young enough that

^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of Women's and Children's Health, Uppsala University, 751 85 Uppsala, Sweden.

E-mail address: berit.hoglund@kbh.uu.se (B. Höglund).

the decision to abstain from having children is relatively close in time to entering into a committed partnership, with the recommended age range being 35–44 years [16]. The ultimate way to study child-free life is through long-term studies. Leading a child-free life is a complex situation both for the individual and from the societal perspective. According to previous research, child-free individuals are often described with negative stereotypes [14,15].

In Nordic media, being child-free is primarily seen as an issue concerning women. It is usually reported in the form of news regarding child-free women’s experiences and life choices [6]. In addition, women’s attitudes to being child-free are constructed as problematic in a different way than men’s. Men are viewed as relatively unaffected by having children or not [6]. Internationally, there are few studies about men avoiding having own children. However, studies have described that some men choose to take a high degree of control over their reproductive bodies and voluntarily seek pre-emptive vasectomies [17]. The decision-making process for having or not having children is fluid and dynamic, influenced by a range of intrinsic and extrinsic values and awareness of being outside the norm [18].

Giddens’ theory (1990) stipulated that globalisation led to individuals having greater influence over their own lives, increasing individualism and disconnecting previous collectives and traditions that could shape the individual’s identity. Furthermore, a new structure in society was adapted and existing traditions and values faded [19]. More knowledge and understanding are needed to clarify the choices of child-free individuals and deal with generally inequitable perceptions in society.

Against that background, our aim was to explore reasons, influencing factors and personal and social factors in individuals who have chosen to lead a child-free life in Sweden.

Methods

The present study had a descriptive design, using individual interviews. The administrators of a child-free group on Facebook were contacted by the first author, and they gave permission for the researchers to contact group members. The information was posted to the Facebook group and those who were interested could register themselves to BH for the interviews. To be included as members of the child-free group, each person had declared that they had made an active choice to be child-free and did not intend to have children in future. The group had 1,079 members and its purpose was to provide a space to communicate with like-minded peers. The 23 members in the FB group who wanted to participate responded to BH that they wanted to join the study and signed a consent form. All the informants had Swedish as their native language.

BH conducted a total of 23 individual interviews by phone between October 2020 to January 2021. The sociodemographic characteristics of the informants are shown in Table 1. The interviews ranged from 36 to 1105 min ($M = 64$ min), lasting a total of 24.77 h, and all interviews were audio-recorded with the respective informant’s permission. Before each interview, the interviewer verified that the informant was alone in a disturbance-free room. The interviews were performed using a semi-structured topic guide that began with the question ‘Would you like to tell me about reasons, influencing factors and personal and social factors that led you to choose a child-free life?’ The data were transcribed verbatim by BH prior to data analysis. The recruitment continued until no further people agreed to participate in the study, yielding 23 interviews; no more new data emerged after 22 interviews and saturation was reached. The thematic network analysis method was used for assessing the participants’ responses [20]. For additional details on the methods used, please see the interview guide in the [supplementary material](#).

Table 1
Sociodemographic characteristics of the informants leading a child-free life.

Gender	
woman	21
man	2
Age (years)	
range	26–53
median	35
Marital status	
single	10
cohabiting with partner	8
living apart from partner	1
married	3
divorced	1
Occupation	
working	18
adult student	3
on disability pension	2
Years since decision on a child-free life	
range	5–45
median	15
Setting	
large city	8
city	7
urban area	2
countryside	6
Geographic location	
southern Sweden	10
mid-Sweden	10
northern Sweden	3

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from the Regional Ethics Committee (Dnr 2020–02867). The participating informants were provided with both verbal and written information about the study and gave written informed consent. The informants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time without explanation.

Data analysis

The data were analysed using thematic network analysis, an illustrative tool for interpreting and analysing qualitative material [20]. During the analysis, interpretation was used to identify a more abstract theme. The material was structured without predetermined themes, through an inductive process. Each author read the data several times to get an overview of the individual interviews. Text sentences were organised into basic themes, each identified by a heading. After that, basic themes were merged into an organising theme. Then, organising themes were grouped together into a global theme.

Lastly, the patterns were interpreted – these are presented here using verbatim quotes. The gender and age distribution of the informants is presented in the Results section. All analytical decisions were discussed between the authors during the analysis and adjusted in accordance with their consensus decisions. See Table 2 for the analytical scheme.

Results

The study included 23 informants. The sociodemographic characteristics of the informants are described in Table 1.

The informants shared their perspectives and experiences of being

Table 2
Example sentences, basic themes, organising themes and global theme.

SENTENCE	BASIC THEME	ORGANISING THEME	GLOBAL THEME
Child-free life gives me a freedom in everyday life that people with children don't have	Being child-free	Pathways to being	
When I was twenty years old, I realised that I don't want to have children, it was not a complicated choice – I made the decision myself, and I have never regretted it	Choice and decision process	child-free	The decision to lead a child-free life is based on the desire for freedom and the ability to govern one's own time in everyday life, and hope for increased openness and understanding from one's surroundings and society
As a child-free individual, I'm identified as being selfish, lazy, immature, and as not taking responsibility in society	Societal views		
It is still taboo to talk about a child-free life, but it is more common in the younger generation	Openness and taboos	Social structures in child-free living	

child-free. The conversations flowed naturally and the informants showed interest and pride in sharing their perspectives.

A thematic network was developed through the analysis and twelve basic themes emerged, from which the following two organising themes were created: 'Pathways to being child-free' and 'Social structures in child-free living' (see Fig. 1). These organising themes were combined into one global theme: 'The decision to lead a child-free life is based on the desire for freedom and the ability to govern one's own time in

everyday life, and hope for increased openness and understanding from one's surroundings and society'. The global theme described the informants' child-free lives as related to being able to plan everyday life independently, actively choosing to be child-free and being steadfast in that choice, and dealing with attitudes and pressure from one's surroundings and society. Moreover, the global theme addressed perceptions and experiences during childhood that influenced individuals in the early stages of the process of choosing a child-free life. It also touched on how and when the choice to lead a child-free life was made, and different opinions about the expressions 'being voluntarily child-free' and 'being voluntarily childless'. Relevant social structures included one's identity and pressure from one's surroundings, society and the media regarding a child-free status. Opinions and experiences of openness and taboos, as well as understanding and treatment by others, were also related to the experience of leading a child-free life.

Shame and guilt were mentioned in relation to considering a child-free life, as was being judged by both oneself and others. This encompassed cultural, ethical, religious and even historical and political aspects of value judgements regarding a child-free lifestyle. The informants' drive for independence in choosing a child-free life was reflected in the fact that they were seldom involved in associations or support groups.

Pathways to being child-free

The organising theme 'Pathways to being child-free' encompassed six basic themes:

- 'Being child-free'
- 'Reasons for choosing to lead a child-free life'
- 'Negative experiences of a child-free life'
- 'Childhood'
- 'Choice and decision process'
- 'Voluntarily child-free/childless'

Being child-free

The informants described child-free life as smooth, but sometimes problematic. The smoothness related to gratitude at the freedom, independence and joy that the choice created, and a feeling of privilege at living in a country where it was possible to choose this lifestyle, regardless of sex or gender. As one 37-year-old woman put it: 'I'm so happy to live in this country where I have the right to choose a child-free life.' Informants also appreciated the calm and pleasantness of living on their own or with only a partner, and they thought this was an easier way to live. Other informants said that they appreciated being able to

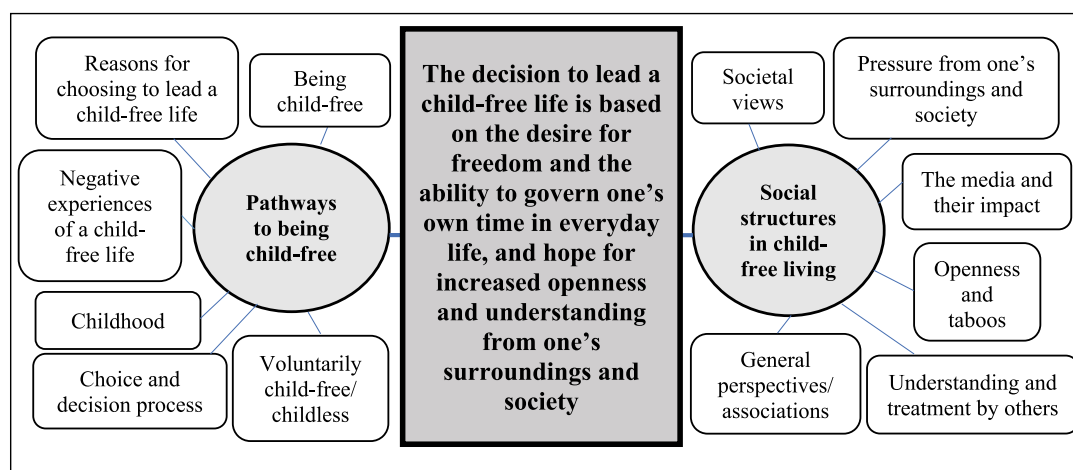


Fig. 1. Network of global, organising and basic themes describing individual perceptions and experiences of leading a child-free life in Sweden.

put themselves first and being free to travel, attend concerts, pursue outdoor activities and meet friends anytime. They also mentioned being independent and not being responsible for the welfare of a child. Women who were older and no longer fertile felt they were less often questioned by their environment and society than they had been when they were younger. However, several informants had received negative comments about them being selfish or too young to make the choice to lead a child-free life, or had been told that they would change their mind. This frustrated them and made them 'feel disrespected and considered stupid' for their choice. The negative comments were perceived by the informants as their not being treated seriously, and were considered to be as difficult as the decision not to have a child.

Reasons for choosing to lead a child-free life

Very few of the informants lacked a clear reason for choosing a child-free life. Most informants described children as a concept separate from themselves. Several of them explained their reason for abstaining from having children to be that they found children uninteresting and something they did not miss or long for. A 44-year-old woman stated: 'I have never been interested in children and I don't miss them.' Others said that there was nothing about children that appealed to them and argued that 'people with children wasted a lot of time and energy on them'. Some informants mentioned that they were not comfortable around children or 'even disliked them'. Several informants had negative experiences of being traumatised during childhood; one mentioned being sexually assaulted by playmates. Some of the informants had had psychological disorders, such as depression and posttraumatic stress disorder, which had influenced their choice of being child-free. One 32-year-old woman and one 35-year-old woman mentioned the world situation, especially as regards overpopulation and the environment, which is illustrated in this quote: 'This world is not a nice place to bring children into.' A few informants described couples with children, in which the woman seemed to take on more childcare responsibilities than the man, which was considered unequal and a trap for women. Poor finances were mentioned as a negative side of parenthood.

Negative experiences of a child-free life

Some of the participating informants had no negative experiences to report related to a child-free life. Several others described many such experiences, such as being questioned by others, meeting with a narrowness of views on people leading a child-free life and being pressured by their surroundings. For instance, a 33-year-old woman informant said: 'People have difficulties understanding my decision to lead a child-free life and I have gotten so many negative reactions, but I think it's their own intrinsic problem.' Several informants strongly emphasised a feeling of being 'the odd one out' and an outsider relative to friends who had children. Strong independence and a resilient personality were needed to be steadfast in such surroundings. This involved being clear in explaining one's views and having sound arguments for the decision to be child-free; otherwise people might tell them that their motives were weak or wrong, as one 26-year-old woman described: 'You have to be independent and strong, counter their arguments and clearly defend your choice.' Some of the informants had ended relationships that had soured because of their desire for a child-free life. Further, it was seen as difficult to find a child-free partner, which meant there were fewer potential partners to choose from in society.

Childhood

Several informants described their childhood as having been good and relatively stable. Others described their parents as unemotional individuals, who in some cases had caused their children to feel depressed. One informant said that her mother was 'hard and cold' and that she had feared her during childhood. Some informants were not brought up by both their parents, as they had divorced. One 53-year-old male informant said: 'I was brought up in foster care, which was not optimal for me.' Another informant considered the family concept to 'be

strange and unpleasant' and disliked growing up within a family. Most of the informants had siblings and/or half-siblings. Their relationships had often shifted from being close to being unstable or they had lost touch over time. A 32-year-old woman had a sibling with a neuropsychiatric disorder and described childhood as a chaotic time, saying: 'I felt unseen by my parents since my sibling was stealing so much time and support from me and my personal needs.'

Playing 'house' in childhood was not common among the informants; likewise, playing with a doll seemed not to have interested them. While their classmates took it for granted that they would have children in the future, some informants described this as being impossible for them to visualise. Some informants had difficulties connecting with other children and felt that their parents should have given them better self-confidence; a 32-year-old woman said: 'My mother should have given me valuable and stable support in childhood, so I could build my self-confidence.'

Choice and decision process

Nearly all of the informants (22 out of 23) had made the decision to be child-free on their own. The only one who had not stated that the decision was made in consultation with their partner. The timing of the decision ranged from early childhood to adulthood. Several of the informants described the decision as a natural thing, whereas others saw it as something that had grown slowly. However, some of them described the process as easy and quick and a 31-year-old man said: 'I have to think now and not later, and I feel so sure and confident in my decision.' Others thought it was a long, difficult and complex process. A few informants had had relationships that ended when their partners wanted them to have children. A 53-year-old man said: 'Two relationships ended due to my choice of a child-free life and it was important to be clear to the partner about choosing a future free from children.' Some informants said that their decision to abstain from having children was related to their education; they had gained knowledge and insights about the earth, climate, resources and food. None of the informants mentioned feeling any hesitation or regrets related to their choice.

Voluntarily child-free/childless

All informants had opinions about the concepts of being voluntarily child-free or voluntarily childless. They talked about the significant differences between these concepts and their inherent values and also described how they self-identified. A 40-year-old woman said: 'Both of these concepts mean that our lifestyle is about excluding children, but in different ways and with different values.' Several of the informants explained being voluntarily child-free as being free from something – an active decision. Furthermore, they claimed that this concept more precisely and correctly described their actual situation. One 35-year-old woman said: 'Being voluntarily child-free was a phrase not used ten years ago, but became more and more common when individuals avoided including children in their lives.'

Some informants were not comfortable with putting the two words 'voluntarily' and 'child-free' together. They felt that this sounded like saying the same thing twice. Some of them felt that the word 'voluntarily' was unnecessary, as 'child-free' already meant choosing to be without something. Moreover, several informants stated that 'child-free' was a positive word and based on something one wished for. Being 'voluntarily childless' was considered to mean that something was missing, although still based on a freely made choice.

Social structures in child-free living

The organising theme 'Social structures in child-free living' encompassed six basic themes:

- 'Societal views'
- 'Pressure from one's surroundings and society'
- 'The media and their impact'
- 'Openness and taboos'

- 'Understanding and treatment by others'
- 'General perspectives and association'

Societal views

The informants revealed different levels of awareness and experiences of how they were viewed in society. A few of them said that they did not care at all what society thought of them, and some felt that others became less prejudiced when they got to know the child-free person. Several informants stated that they were seen by others as someone to feel sorry for, who could not find a partner, a failure, a lonely person and possibly covering for not being able to have children. One 41-year-old woman said: 'Many look at me with pity, as someone who has a kind of failed life – being single, no children and alone in my everyday life.' Some others said that they were regarded as being irresponsible, nonchalant and immature. Some claimed that they were seen as suspect, strange individuals. A 36-year-old woman stated the following: 'They see me as a strange individual since I'm living in a relationship but have no children and they think I hate children.' Another informant said that she had probably thought about and reflected on being child-free more than many people with children had. Some mentioned that they were viewed as careerists. Several of the informants described there being many opinions from society as a whole about leading a child-free life. Some of them believed that a child-free life was the best for the environment, but it seemed difficult to deviate from the strong child-centric norm. Several others stated that society required individuals to have at least a few children to keep the birth rate stable, so society could live on; some said that society normalised having children, but that this was based on very limited knowledge.

Some informants stated that women faced more criticism for being child-free than men. The cause for this was considered to be the traditional gender roles in society. A 41-year-old woman stated: 'The biology of giving birth and breastfeeding is related to the woman's body, which could be seen as labelling the woman as the clear caregiver.' Some other informants felt like second-class citizens compared with parents, who were prioritised with parental leave, family allowances and child benefits.

Pressure from one's environment and society

Some informants suggested that society and their surroundings might slowly be moving away from trying to exert an influence over child-free people. A very few informants had not felt or experienced any external pressure to have children. One 35-year-old woman said: 'It is just a good attitude and understanding from my immediate surroundings.' Rather, almost all informants had experiences of and opinions about different types of pressure from their surroundings and society. One informant stated that her mother had been shocked at first, but later understood and accepted her arguments. Some informants referred to the biological clock ticking quickly. Some others referred to ageing and believed that when they grew older, society would be more willing to accept a decision to be child-free. In particular, being an older individual and having a chronic disease or deep depression was reported as being a source of positive understanding from one's surroundings.

Some informants felt treated in an unequal way by workmates and employers. A 33-year-old woman described this in the following quote: 'At Christmas and summer holidays, parents are given priority over us child-free individuals, which is unfair because I want to be with my family too.' Some informants had been told by colleagues that they would be good parents, which was experienced as an irrelevant, unnecessary and uninteresting comment.

The media and their impact

Several informants felt the impact of the media, while a few did not. Most of the informants who felt the impact of the media stated that they followed media reporting on the topic of being child-free, at least to

some degree. One 43-year-old woman said: 'Previously, there was almost nothing written about a child-free life in the media, but now it has increased through Facebook and podcasts.' Another informant described decreasing interest in the media with age. A third informant talked positively about the media's opportunities to give child-free individuals more power and knowledge and increase the general population's insights into their choices. The informants who mentioned the impact of the media described having a need for confirmation and feeling a sense of identity and community. They felt strengthened when they heard about other child-free individuals. However, some of the informants who did not feel the impact of the media believed that the media had not influenced their decision to be child-free.

Openness and taboos

There were both similarities and differences of opinions among the informants regarding openness and taboos related to a child-free life. Some felt that openness had increased in society over the years; a 38-year-old woman said: 'Society is increasingly accepting us – and with the younger generation, society will be more open-minded.' Some of the informants related openness and taboos to themselves. They said that the only way to increase openness was for them to talk about leading a child-free life. On the one hand, some of them had experienced openness when they told others that they had chosen to exclude children from their lives. On the other hand, some informants thought that they might be ignored if they disclosed the choice of a child-free life. In addition, some informants said that they did not want to expose themselves to the censure of people who thought they should have children.

Experiences of taboos related to a child-free life differed with gender, geographic location and friendships. Some stated that they had noticed that men reacted more strongly when women said they did not want to have children. Further, they felt that it was easier to lead a child-free life in a large city than in rural areas, as cities offered less social control and more people who liked them and wanted to socialise. Others associated taboos with violence and awkward situations. They stated that they were often viewed with scepticism due to being child-free. They felt harassed by others but did not want to tread on anyone's toes, as this was a sensitive topic. Almost all informants discussed their feelings. Some felt shame and guilt in relation to talking about their child-free life with others, but others felt no shame and guilt about it at all. Some informants associated speaking more freely with older age, confidence, selfishness and therapy; some stated that they were older now and felt more confident in what they wanted and could therefore stand firmly by their choice, while others felt guilt and shame when others thought they were just thinking of themselves. Some of them had even been in long-term therapy for this reason.

Understanding and treatment by others

The majority of the informants said that their parents and siblings were understanding and treated them fairly, regardless of their being child-free. However, they described that their parents' reactions had evolved, from first being questioning, to disappointed and then ultimately accepting the decision. Some said that their parents thought they were too young to make this serious life decision and were disappointed that they would not have grandchildren; while others' parents had always been understanding and supportive and acknowledged that their offspring should make the choice to be child-free on their own.

Some informants had not discussed the matter in depth with their parents and stated that their parents would never question their decision in their presence. Several informants described their siblings as being neutral or finding the decision incomprehensible and not worth discussing. Some mentioned that their siblings supported their decision; one informant was close to her sister, who had not questioned her decision. Another informant had been told by an older sister with children what she thought she missed out on by not being a mother. Being shown

understanding and getting fair treatment from relatives was mainly reported among those who had a small family and/or lived geographically far from their family, but also when relatives were aware of the decision to be child-free and made few comments about this.

Friends were often described as being accepting and building a sense of community; one 26-year-old woman stated: 'There is a lot of respect and acceptance. We discuss advantages and disadvantages and I only hang out with friends who don't criticise my decision.' Others commented on gender in relation to friends and being child-free, saying that men were usually more upset than women and might claim that the body was made for bearing children. They thought men felt more deeply about this matter because their bodies could not produce children. The informants also discussed whether or not they had talked about this topic with co-workers. Generally, signs from younger co-workers indicated that times were changing. Some informants said that they had not told anybody at work and that nobody had asked them, while others stated that their colleagues were completely understanding and had their own opinions on the matter. Many had younger co-workers who were more interested in this life choice, with several of them being child-free too.

The informants had little experience of their employers showing understanding of their child-free life and ensuring equal treatment. Still, some employers were described as having a generally positive or negative attitude. One of the informants said that their current manager was also child-free and was delighted that they were both in the same situation. Another informant said that their employer wanted employees to have children, in the hope that this would keep them from moving elsewhere.

Informants who had encountered health and medical care personnel reported feeling that they were treated undramatically, as the care workers simply wrote down the information that they were child-free, but also felt that staff took it for granted that they would become parents in future. Some women said that after having a pap smear, their midwife said they were welcome back when they got pregnant; the informants considered this to be norm-driven behaviour. Others described counsellors behaving like bullies, claiming to know better than them what their life choices should be and creating a sudden need to defend their decision. One informant pointed out that many people had conservative values and described meeting a physician who wondered what their nuclear family looked like. Informants who had a psychiatric diagnosis reported that this seemed to increase acceptance of the choice to abstain from having children.

General perspectives and associations

The informants connected a child-free life to various cultural perspectives. Some of them pointed out that tradition, including how important family was considered to be, would impact on the choice. It was stated that reproduction was not considered to be as important in Sweden as in the Middle East, for example. Others were more critical of the views within the country and described there being a cultural norm in Sweden to have children and that individuals were not viewed as grownups unless they had taken that step.

Almost all informants renounced any form of religion. They believed it would be difficult to reconcile a child-free life with religion. However, some informants suggested there was a link between religion and procreation; one 35-year-old woman stated: 'I grew up in a Christian home and felt that the religion prioritised the birth of children.' Others stated that if they had been religious, they would probably have had children and lead a more normative life. Some mentioned having encountered religious couples with children and their views of women, and wanting to change them. Another informant stated that the more religious a person was, the stronger the norm to have children would be.

The majority of the informants believed that there was likely a history of people choosing a child-free life. Some mentioned their families in this context; one 43-year-old woman said: 'I live my life now and can

opt out of having children, which I decide all by myself – compare that with my grandmother who had several children but did not want to have children at all.' Another described that there had probably been individuals who did not want to have children in the past and that they might have been viewed as mentally ill. Yet another informant talked about the importance of education in relation to a child-free life and explained that when she studied history at school, she had become increasingly aware of women's inability to decide over their lives. Other informants mentioned political motives related to freedom from children; some stated that when fewer children were born in the Western world, this caused unrest in society as the economy was based on taxpayers.

None of the informants were members of or supported any associations related to being child-free. However, all informants were members of at least one child-free group on Facebook or some were involved in podcasts on the topic of being child-free, because they wanted the support of others and sometimes wanted to express their views.

Discussion

This study explored child-free individuals' perceptions and experiences of leading a child-free life in Sweden. Thematic network analysis revealed two organising themes and one global theme: 'The decision to lead a child-free life is based on the desire for freedom and the ability to govern one's own time in everyday life, and hope for increased openness and understanding from one's surroundings and society'. The findings were based on individuals' perceptions and experiences, and similarities and differences in the informants' statements. Choosing a child-free life was usually associated with individual values and reasons and more seldom with issues related to the planet or the climate. Despite having taken different aspects into account, all the informants had the same strong belief that they had made the right decision for themselves. Ultimately, the decision meant leading a child-free life characterised by freedom, the ability to decide how to use one's time and having independence, which is in line with the findings of Park [15]. Furthermore, this study pointed out that women were much more likely than men to be motivated by career considerations, while men were much more likely than women to acknowledge financial issues.

Pathways to being child-free

The analysis revealed that the informants were happy and content to live in a country with a permissive culture, where it was possible to choose a child-free life, as shown in the organising theme 'Pathways to being child-free'. The theme also comprised a view of prioritising oneself and being free from the responsibilities associated with having a child. A complete lack of interest in having their own children and – for some – a dislike of children was stated as significant in choosing a child-free life, in line with the results of previous studies [21–23]. Few informants offered more altruistic arguments for child-free life, such as environmental aspects or global problems, also in line with findings presented in previous research [15,24,25].

Overall, the informants described a long and complex process which had led them to a decision, in early childhood or adulthood, to lead a child-free life. If the decision was made in childhood – a so-called early articulator – this was described as a natural process based on firm resolve and an intention to abstain from having any offspring at all. A later decision – a later articulator – was considered to be made in a mature and reflective stage of life, as described in previous studies [16,26,27,28]. Several of the informants felt external pressure and disappointment from people in their surroundings, such as parents, siblings or friends, with comments about being too young, too immature and unable to know yet if they would want to have children – even being told that they had simply not met the right partner yet. Others had not met any pushback at all.

An important finding in the organising theme was the informants

needed to stand firm and be determined in their decision of leading a child-free life; negative views on being child-free were reflected in the perceptions of others and in societal norms. Women, in particular, felt a need to defend their decision. This may be associated with the findings of previous studies, showing that pronatalism and a traditional view of family remain pervasive [29–33]. The informants' childhoods ranged from uncomplicated and to highly complicated. It seemed that a stable upbringing with parents and siblings did not guarantee a desire to have children. In contrast, another study found that individuals living with both biological parents at 14 years of age, when asked in late adolescence, were less likely to expect childlessness compared with individuals living in other family types [34]. One study has shown that the number of siblings is positively correlated with expecting to have a larger family [35].

The analysis showed that the length of the decision-making process in years varied greatly among the informants. As the informants' ages ranged from 26 to 53 years (median 35 years), they may have gone on to have children later, although science has shown that fertility declines drastically after the age of 35 years [36–38].

Half of the informants lived in single-person households, in line with how the general population lived in Sweden at the time of the study [39]. A previous study reported that living alone can be viewed in two ways [14]. It can be seen as a situation in which the issue of children is non-existent, as there is no prospective co-parent. Alternatively, single life can be seen as a voluntary choice, often based on the same preferences as voluntary freedom from children, including valuing freedom in everyday life highly. Remaining single and child-free may for example be due to not being interested in starting a family or not having found a partner – or a combination of the two.

Several of the participating women had experienced being questioned less often about their choice of a child-free life as they got older (even while they were still fertile), as described in the basic theme openness and taboos. This is in line with previous research showing that there are certain social norms for when it is appropriate to have children [13].

Almost all of the informants stated that they identified with and felt most comfortable with the term 'child-free'. This could be related to the findings in a study by Morison et al. (2016), which indicated that individuals who were 'voluntary childless' or 'child-free' faced stigma and developed interpersonal stigma management strategies for reproductive freedom [40]. Moreover, to resist stigmatisation, some made use of a 'child-free-by-choice' script, which enabled them to hold a positive view of themselves as autonomous, rational and responsible decision makers. They could also mobilise a 'disavowal of choice' script that allowed an individual who was unable to choose childlessness (for whatever reasons) to be blameless regarding deviation from the norm of parenthood. Furthermore, they stated that it was unnecessary to use the word 'voluntarily', because the word 'free' signals a voluntary situation. This is in line with previous studies [7,8].

Social structures in child-free living

The majority of the informants perceived their surroundings and society to view child-free individuals as lonely, unhappy, irresponsible and strange, leading failed lives, as shown in the organising theme 'Social structures in child-free living'. Previous studies have associated child-free women with negative concepts, such as being unfeminine, dissatisfied, bitter and desperate [10]. Child-free people have been viewed with feelings of pity and criticism [41] and child-free women have been seen as selfish, cold and materialistic [11,42]. In the present study, the informants rejected all these associations as untrue. They described themselves as leading ordinary lives, like others in society, only without children – simply because they did not want to have children.

For several of the informants, being a member of a child-free Facebook group was important. The motivation behind this was to get

support and to belong to a community with other like-minded people. Some of them also felt a need to express themselves as child-free individuals. However, it was unusual for the child-free individuals to be members of any traditional associations or support groups in society. In contrast, a previous study reported that voluntarily child-free forum members sought out esteem and network support significantly more than others, in order to cope with the social isolation stemming from others' unfavourable views of their reproductive choices [43].

Several of the informants described it as becoming more common to choose a child-free life, especially among those in the younger generations. However, the established child norm was still considered to permeate society and several informants had been subjected to disrespect from others due to leading a child-free life. This strong social norm, known as pronatalism, is maintained and favours motherhood as the ultimate form for women's participation in politics – bearing and rearing children becomes a patriotic duty. Such reasoning makes women responsible for reproduction [44]. Its focus can be on what women are considered to miss out on personally or holding them responsible for the supposed destruction of society if the birth rate decreases in the future. The respondents were met with more respect and understanding by close friends, who usually had a more in-depth understanding of their decision to lead a child-free life.

This organising theme encompassed descriptions from some of the informants of encounters with healthcare professionals, where irrelevant norm-driven opinions and behaviours emerged. This included referring to future pregnancy or touting conservative values related to the nuclear family. Informants also emphasised their own responsibility in initiating openness and clearly reflecting it to their surroundings and society, in order to facilitate life as a child-free individual. This might include talking about a child-free life as a valuable one, showing that every-one should be able to choose not to have children, without being viewed as second-class citizens. Some informants stated that society was growing more open-minded and positive, especially in the young generation.

Several of the informants mentioned that historical and religious perspectives seldom included associations to freedom from children. For example, historically, women with mental illness had been forced to give birth against their wishes, without being allowed to make decision related to their physical and sexual health. Women were not allowed to have their own finances, which was not consistent with choosing a child-free life. Regarding religion and the rules on traditional family formation, some of the informants stated that the historical model could be a reality in society even nowadays. The respondents described themselves as having influence over their own individual choices and decision-making process and identifying as childfree in an increasingly open-minded society.

Strengths and limitations

This study had several strengths. The informants were recruited from all over the country, including both sparsely and densely populated regions. One author conducted all the interviews, consistently following the same interview guide, and all the rules on conducting interviews and analysing data were observed. Quotes from the informants have been presented in the basic themes. No new data appeared after 22 interviews. The framework of Giddens' theory (1990) strengthened the results. Trustworthiness was increased by describing the process in detail in order to facilitate the analytical understanding [20]. Lastly, both authors collaborated on data collection and analysis and interpreted the results together.

There were also some limitations. This was a qualitative study and the authors make no claim that the sample represents the entirety of the child-free population – rather giving a voice to some individuals. All informants belonged to the same Facebook group, which is a limitation *per se*. The informants may not be seen as representing all perspectives among the child-free individuals in this Facebook group. Only two men

were included as respondents in the study, which is a misallocation between the genders and could have affected the outcome.

The authors were midwives and their prior understandings of the topic may have influenced both the research process and the results. When discussing the analysis, they deliberately worked to put aside existing preconceptions [20].

A longitudinal study would be required to know whether the informants remained child-free later in life.

Conclusion

The child-free individuals included here described their strong convictions and the decision process resulting in the choice to abstain from having children. They enjoyed their lives, alone or with a partner. They greatly valued their freedom, being able to decide how to spend their time and having independence in everyday life. Leading a child-free life can provide increased opportunities for freedom, independence and self-determination regarding what to do in everyday life and when. Childfree individuals deserve to be respected and treated seriously, without being subjected to pronatalism by healthcare professionals caring for them or from society on the whole.

Funding

This research did not receive any specific grant from funding agencies in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Declaration of Competing Interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.srhc.2022.100809>.

References

- [1] Ramu GN. Voluntarily childless and parental couples: A comparison of their lifestyle characteristics. *J Fam Econ Iss* 1985;7:130–45. <https://doi.org/10.1007/BF00986582>.
- [2] Rowland DT. Historical trends in childlessness. *J Fam Iss* 2007;28:1311–7. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303823>.
- [3] Dye JL. Fertility of American women. *Current Population Reports, US Census Bureau* 2008;20:558.
- [4] Osborne RS. Percentage of childless women 40 to 44 years old increases since 1976. *Census Bureau Reports*. Washington, DC: US. Census Bureau Press Release 2003.
- [5] Biddlecom A, Martin S. Childless in America. *Contexts* 2006;5:54.
- [6] Engwall K, Petersen H (Eds.). *Frivillig barnlöshet. Barnfrihet i en nordisk kontext*. Stockholm: Dialogos Förlag; 2010. ISBN 978-91-7504-229-9.
- [7] Ramsay K, Letherby G. The experience of academic non-mothers in the gendered university. *Gend Work Org* 2006;13:25–44. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2006.00294.x>.
- [8] Wood GJ, Newton J. Childlessness and women managers: Choice, context and discourses. *Gend Work Org* 2006;13:338–58. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-0432.2006.00311.x>.
- [9] Gillespie R. When no means no: Disbelief, disregard and deviance as discourses of voluntary childlessness. *Women's Stud Internat Forum* 2000;23:223–34. [https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395\(00\)00076-5](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0277-5395(00)00076-5).
- [10] Letherby G. Childless and bereft? Stereotypes and realities in relation to “voluntary” and “involuntary” childlessness and womanhood. *Sociolog Inquiry* 2002;72:7–20. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1475-682X.00003>.
- [11] Park K. Stigma management among the voluntarily childless. *Soc Perspect* 2002;45:21–45. <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2002.45.1.21>.
- [12] Keizer R, Dykstra PA, Jansen M. Pathways into childlessness: Evidence of gendered life course dynamics. *J Biosoc Sci* 2007;40:863–78. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021932007002660>.
- [13] Dykstra PA, Hagestad G. Roads less taken. Developing a nuanced view of older adults without children. *J Fam Iss* 2007;28:1275–310. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X07303822>.
- [14] Tanturri ML, Mencarini L. Childless or childfree. Paths to voluntary childlessness in Italy. *Popul Dev Rev* 2008;34:51–77. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2008.00205.x>.
- [15] Park K. Choosing childlessness: Weber's typology of action and motives of the voluntarily childless. *Soc Inquiry* 2005;75:372–402. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1475-682X.2005.00127.x>.
- [16] Abma JC, Gladys MM. Childlessness among older women in the United States: trends and profiles. *J Marr Fam* 2006;68:1045–56. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1741-3737.2006.00312.x>.
- [17] Terry G, Braun V. Sticking my finger up at evolution: Unconventionality, selfishness, and choice in the talk of men who have had “preemptive” vasectomies. *Men Masculinities* 2012;15:207–29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1097184X11430126>.
- [18] Smith I, Knight T, Fletcher R, Macdonald JA. When men choose to be childless: An interpretative phenomenological analysis. *J Soc Pers Relationships* 2020;37:325–44. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0265407519864444>.
- [19] Giddens A. Consequences of modernity *Sex Reprod Healthc* 2022;31:100696. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.srhc.2022.100696>.
- [20] Attride-Stirling J. Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qual Res* 2001;1:385–405. <https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307>.
- [21] Fjell TI. Different voices on voluntary childlessness (voluntary childlessness) in the media and on the Internet. *Ethnolog Scand* 2009;39:5–17.
- [22] Giles D, Shaw RS, Morgan W. Representations of voluntary childlessness in the UK press, 1990–2008. *J Health Psychol* 2009;14:1218–28. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105309346341>.
- [23] Qu L, Weston R, Kilmartin C. Children? No children? The effect of changing personal relationships on decisions about having children. *Fam Matt* 2000;57:14–9.
- [24] Duxbury L, Medhill J, Lyons S. Childfree by choice: A study of childfree women in North America – Summary report. Ottawa. Centre for Research and Education on Women and Work. 2005.
- [25] Scott L. Two is enough: A couple's guide to living childless by choice. Berkeley, California: Seal Press; 2009.
- [26] Avison M, Furnham A. Personality and voluntary childlessness. *J Pop Research* 2015;32:45–67. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12546-014-9140-6>.
- [27] Doyle J, Pooley JA, Breen L. A phenomenological exploration of the childfree choice in a sample of Australian women. *J Health Psychol* 2013;18:397–407. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1359105312444647>.
- [28] Hakim C. A new approach to explaining fertility patterns: Preference theory. *Popul Dev Rev* 2002;29:349–73. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1728-4457.2003.00349.x>.
- [29] Durham WT. The rules-based process of revealing/concealing the family planning decisions of voluntarily child-free couples: A communication privacy management perspective. *Commun Stud* 2008;59:132–47. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10510970802062451>.
- [30] Turnbull B, Graham ML, Taket AR. Social exclusion of Australian childless women in their reproductive years. *Soc Incl* 2016;4(102–15). <https://doi.org/10.17645/si.v4i1.489>.
- [31] Graham M, Rich S. Representations of childless women in the Australian print media. *Fem Med Stud* 2012;14:500–18. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2012.737346>.
- [32] Healy J. Rejecting reproduction: The National Organization for Non-Parents and childfree activism in 1970s America. *J Wom Hist* 2016;28:131–56.
- [33] Tanaka K, Johnson NE. Childlessness and mental well-being in a global context. *J Fam Iss* 2016;37:1027–45. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0192513X14526393>.
- [34] Trent K. Family context and adolescents' fertility expectations. *Youth Soc* 1994;26:118–37. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0044118X94026001006>.
- [35] Hayford SR. The evolution of fertility expectations over the life course. *Demography* 2009;46:765–83. <https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.0.0073>.
- [36] American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists Committee on Gynecologic Practice and Practice Committee. Female age-related fertility decline. Committee Opinion No. 589. *Fertil Steril* 2014;101:633–4.
- [37] Crawford NM, Steiner AZ. Age-related infertility. *Obstet Gynecol Clin N Am* 2015;42:15–25. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ogc.2014.09.0>.
- [38] Eijkemans MJ, van Poppel F, Habbema DF, Smith KR, Leridon H, te Velde ER. Too old to have children? Lessons from natural fertility populations. *Hum Reprod* 2014;29:1304–12.
- [39] Statistics Sweden. Hushåll i Sverige [Households in Sweden], <https://www.scb.se/hitta-statistik/sverige-i-siffror/manniskorna-i-sverige/hushall-i-sverige/>; 2021 [accessed 11 April 2021].
- [40] Morison T, Macleod C, Lynch I, Mijas M, Shivakumar ST. Stigma resistance in online childfree communities: the limitations of choice rhetoric. *Psych Wom Quart* 2016;40:184–98.
- [41] Mollen D. Voluntarily childfree women: Experiences and counseling considerations. *J Ment Health Counsel* 2006;28:269–84. <https://doi.org/10.17744/mehc.28.3.39w5h93mreb0mk4f>.
- [42] Kelly M. Women's voluntary childlessness: A radical rejection of motherhood? *Wom Stud Quarterly* 2009.
- [43] Yeshua-Katz D. Blame or shame: The search for online support and stigma origin among Israeli childless women. *Mass Comm Soc* 2018;22:117–38. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2018.1469152>.
- [44] Daly M. Changing family life in Europe: Significance for state and society. *European Soc* 2005;7:379–98.