

The wish for a child

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The wish for a child

Anna Rotkirch^{1,*}

1 ‘Turn off the lamp’

We quarrel over trivial things, as families do. When I come home from the office, in a country where the sun sets before four in the afternoon wintertime, I like to turn on all the lamps, a behaviour the rest of the household deeply disapproves of. That particular February day in 2020, my 14-year-old daughter switched off a dimmed light exclaiming: “If you continue doing that, I can never have any children!”

I snapped back something about her own carbon footprint, and compared the impact of teenage online series binge watching to me enjoying one modest LED lamp. Internally, however, I was stunned, and quietly pleased. While I knew that my daughter would probably like to become a mother, I had not understood that children were such an integral part of her plans for the future. I also sensed a certain optimism in her calculus: even if energy consumption and our current way of life have created a world in which her generation may not feel safe to have children, the situation could, from her point of view, still be changed – the lamp could be switched off.

My guess is that such a combination of personal wishes and societal hopes will determine future fertility trends in wealthy, democratic societies like contemporary Finland. Individualistic lifestyles, high living standards and perceived resource scarcity – whether economic, social or psychological – have resulted in young Finns currently both wanting to have and actually having fewer children than previous generations. More worryingly, these conditions also appear to have resulted in growing uncertainty and ambivalence regarding the decision about whether and when to have children. In the wake of the novel coronavirus pandemic, levels of economic hardship will be significant, which could further suppress fertility. However, cognitive and emotional resilience might also grow.

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2 To have or not to have

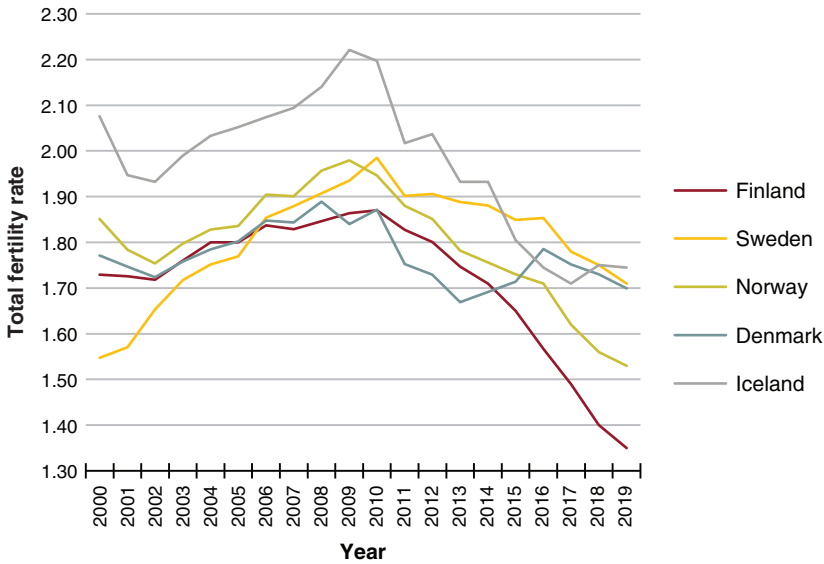
The single key variable influencing fertility in affluent and liberal democracies is the wish to have children. To have or to not have children is the question for many. Individuals who do not want to reproduce can safely and without social stigma avoid doing so. In Finland, as in the rest of the Nordic countries, gender equality has increased in tandem with growing respect for sexual and reproductive rights, efficient sexual education in schools and access to safe and reliable contraceptives. Thus, fortunately, family planning works in the sense of enabling people to avoid unwanted pregnancies. In Finland, most pregnancies are planned and most children are born wanted. Globally, we hold the record for the lowest number of induced abortions (7.6 per 1,000 women of reproductive age in 2019, OSF 2019).

The other side of family planning – whether to have a child, and if so, with whom, and when – may, however, have become trickier, at least for some demographic groups. Making decisions about reproduction has always been a complex process. Sexual desire and parental bonding are species-typical human characteristics that appear in all known societies and in most individuals in conducive circumstances, without being specifically taught or mandated. Yet even these relatively straightforward, biological stepping stones of family formation can vary substantially depending on ecological and cultural conditions and individual characteristics (Hrdy 1999). This is probably because humans have relatively few offspring in which we invest heavily. Throughout our evolutionary history, reproducing at the wrong time could threaten the survival of the mother, the baby and other household members as well. Timing reproduction is, therefore, an important skill, which can be expected to be sensitive to environmental cues about when it is safe and desirable to have a baby (Rotkirch 2007; McAllister et al. 2016).

Today, modern contraceptive use has introduced another cognitive threshold to reproductive decision-making. For most adults in today's Nordic countries, the transition to pregnancy and parenting includes the conscious decision to stop using contraceptives, which has, in turn, become culturally linked to being “ready”. This notion generally means having an apartment, a stable income, and a good couple relationship; as well as being individually mature enough and ready to provide the child with time, attention, and good living conditions (Bernhardt and Bergnerh 2013; Rotkirch et al. 2017).

Young adults need to balance the pros and cons of parenting, and are now continuing to do so at higher ages than was the case for earlier generations. Most young Finns move out of their parental home around the age of 24 (Ghosh et al. 2019), and often live alone in adulthood for prolonged periods of time, without a spouse or children. The proportion of Finns aged 20 to 35 years who are living alone has doubled in the last three decades (from 14.2% in 1992 to 28.6% in 2019, OSF 2020b). Thus, there is more time spent living without a family, more space for wishing and planning, and also more room for changing one's mind.

Figure 1:
Total fertility rates in the Nordic countries 2000–2019



Source: National statistical agencies (2020).

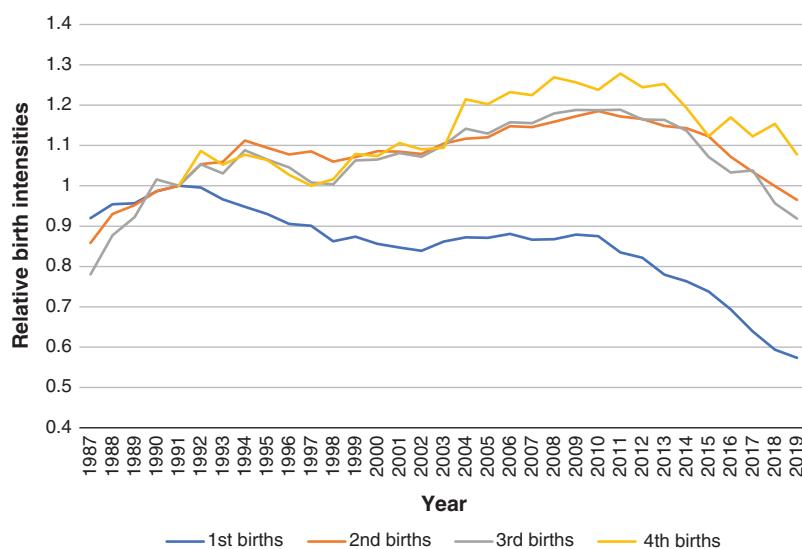
3 Falling fertility in the Nordic countries

Throughout the 2010s, total fertility rates fell in all five Nordic countries, and most dramatically in Finland. As Figure 1 illustrates, Finnish fertility had fallen to 1.35 in 2019. This rate represents an all-time low in a country that has one of the longest annual demographic time series in the world, starting in 1722 (when Finland was a part of Sweden; Reiter and Lutz 2019); it is the lowest level ever recorded in any Nordic country.

Finland is known for its increase in total fertility rates during the country's economic recession in the 1990s, providing an exception to the usual correlation between economic hardship and fertility decline in wealthy countries. However, first children were less likely to be born in the 1990s, and the increase in fertility was driven by higher parities (Vikat 2002). By comparison, the last decade saw a decline in all parities. First births in particular were much less common towards the end of the 2010s than during the preceding three decades, while higher parities have declined to levels comparable to those before the financial crisis of the 1990s (Figure 2).

Indeed, around three-quarters of the decline in fertility in the 2010s can be attributed to women having fewer first children (Hellstrand, Nisén and Myrskylä 2020; Roustaei et al. 2019). This trend may be partly explained by the postponement

Figure 2:
Birth intensity for 1st to 4th children in Finland 1987–2019, 1991=1



Source: Statistics Finland and Population Research Institute.

of the first birth until higher ages. However, throughout the decade, fertility fell in all age groups between 25 and 40, which indicates a pattern of suppression rather than of postponement (Hellstrand, Nisén and Myrskylä 2020). Moreover, as such a prolonged decline in births among women aged 30 and above has not been previously observed in the Nordic countries, it appears to signal some changes that go deeper than postponement.

Period fertility rates can be expected to fluctuate in low-fertility societies (Sobotka 2017), the 2010s may have left a lasting mark on Finnish population dynamics, although it is obviously too early to tell. Given the prolonged decline, the projected completed cohort fertility for women born in Finland in 1975–1988 is also very low, at below 1.6 (Hellstrand et al. 2020). In addition, the scenarios of trends in total fertility rates until 2040 developed by the same research group predict only a slight recuperation, to 1.54 on average (with 95% confidence interval of 1.42–1.67) (Nisén et al. 2020).

The freefall in Finnish fertility came to an end in late 2019, as in the first half of 2020, almost 600 more babies were born than in the previous year (OSF 2020a). However, these early prospects for a modest recuperation in fertility rates may be hampered by the Covid-19 pandemic.

The recent fertility downturn has perplexed demographers and policy-makers alike. For decades, countries with very low fertility had looked to the Nordic

countries for inspiration on issues of early childhood care, parental leave and the participation of fathers. Social scientists at the Population Research Institute, where I work, were used to lecturing Japanese, South Korean, Estonian and Russian visiting delegations about how to achieve both high female labour force participation rates and comparatively high fertility rates. No longer. As a perceptive essay in the *New York Times* pondered, “Something is stopping us from creating the families we claim to want. But what? . . . Around the world, economic, social and environmental conditions function as a diffuse, barely perceptible contraceptive. And yes, it is even happening in Denmark” (Sussmann 2019). And, it turns out, it is happening in Finland and Norway as well.

4 Lower ideal numbers of children

The Family Barometer surveys conducted by the Population Research Institute have highlighted changes in fertility ideals and intentions, and have documented a clear shift in attitudes towards children over the last decade (Miettinen 2015; Rotkirch et al. 2017). The changed “landscape” of Millennials’ childbearing behaviour has been characterised by both the rapid spread of the child-free lifestyle and a higher threshold for entering parenthood for those who want to have children.

First, Finns want to have fewer children now than they did in the past. In surveys conducted in the 1990s and the early 2000s, Finns expressed a desire to have between 2.3 and 2.5 children on average, with quite a few respondents indicating they wanted to have three or more children, and relatively few respondents reporting that they were voluntarily childless: at that time, around 4–5% of the adult population of reproductive age said their ideal number of children was zero, and around 35–40% said they wanted to have three or more children. But by the 2010s, the ideal number of children cited by survey respondents had declined, ranging between 2.0 and 2.2, on average. The share of respondents who were voluntarily childless had risen to around 12% (Miettinen 2015). Among Finns aged 20–29 years, the ideal mean number of children progressively declined from 2.54 in 2008, to 2.32 in 2015 and to 2.27 in 2018 (Berg 2018; Berg et al. n.d.).

As the road from formulating an ideal number of children to becoming a parent is uneven, people in most developed societies have fewer children than they want (see, e.g., Stone 2019 and the Fertility Ideals Database). In Western societies, few individuals who do not want to have children of their own end up having them (e.g., Gemmill 2019), but many of those who want to have children do not end up having as many as they had hoped for. It is easier to remain childless than it is to become a parent. From this perspective, the clear reduction in childbearing ideals among Finns goes a long way towards explaining the downturn in total fertility rates. If a larger proportion of young adults today — representing up to a threefold increase over previous generations — prefer to have no children, they will succeed in remaining childless. Among the rest, the desired numbers of children are somewhat lower, and the numbers of children they will actually have will continue to be below those

levels (e.g., if you want three, you may end up with two; and if you want two, you may end up with one or zero).

Second, the threshold to becoming a parent appears to be higher now than it was in the past. Parenthood is perceived as being a highly demanding responsibility that requires considerable personal, material and social resources. This is a desirable development from the child's point of view, since having dedicated and resource-providing parents boosts a child's well-being and development. But for parents, the standards they are expected to meet are high: namely, that both partners have a foothold in the labour market, have a proper home, feel emotionally ready, and are certain that they want to become parents. As a consequence of these pressures, people with more resources also reproduce more: while fertility rates have fallen across educational groups, they are currently lower among men and women with lower education than with higher education (OSF 2017). Thus, it appears that those who "have it all" will also have more children (see also Mencarini et al. 2018).

5 Uncertainty and lifestyle factors

While the forces that are transforming childbearing cultures are not fully understood, it is clear that the standard economic or policy factors do not suffice to explain them (e.g., Comolli et al. 2019). Social and economic factors have not grown objectively worse in the lives of young Finns; indeed, they have mostly improved. Family policies and leave benefits remain generous, and levels of gender equality have increased, both in Finnish society and within households.

Several explanations have been proposed for the Finnish fertility decline of the 2010s, ranging from the country's historically high levels of childlessness (Rotkirch and Miettinen 2017) and of individualism, which may be helping to create a "low fertility trap" (Lutz et al. 2006), to the effects of the 1990 recession on the Finnish economy (Rotkirch et al. 2017).

One explanation for lower fertility that seems quite plausible is related to perceived uncertainty and stalled social mobility (e.g., Comolli 2017). Another is related to lifestyles: i.e., that as social media raises people's awareness of global lifestyles to an unprecedented extent, certain standards of travelling, living and consuming appear desirable, and also within reach for increasingly large proportions of the population.

In a factor analysis of declared reasons for postponing or foregoing childbearing provided in the *Family Barometer* survey from 2018, two main factors emerged, which we refer to here as uncertainty and lifestyle. Among Finns aged 20–49, *uncertainty* was shown to be related to the "traditional" factors that represent economic constraints. For example, respondents expressed concerns that they had an unsatisfactory financial or work situation, that they or their partner were still in education, that they were receiving insufficient support from society, or that their current apartment was too small. The uncertainty the respondents reported was also related to social resource scarcity, such as having difficulties arranging childcare,

combining work and childcare, or advancing in their profession or career; as well as to psychological doubts about having a child, such as concerns that they were too young or not mature enough, or that their relationship was not strong enough. The other main factor found to be associated with not having children, *lifestyle*, was more clear-cut, with significant shares of respondents expressing a reluctance to give up their current lifestyle. Specifically, many young adults said that they did not want to be tied to children, that their lifestyle was not suitable for parenting, or that having children was not an issue in their relationship (Savelieva et al. n.d.).

Unfortunately, the *Family Barometer* surveys did not ask young adults about their attitudes towards climate change. Qualitative evidence indicates that such considerations feature in reasons relating to both perceived uncertainty and lifestyle: i.e., that being worried about climate change is not the decisive reason to forgo reproduction, but it is yet another argument against having children. Notice, for instance, how anxiety over climate change intertwines with job and social uncertainty in this account written by a young married man in his late twenties in the autumn of 2019¹:

[B]oth of us have baby fever, but our life situation is too unstable. We are both working, but my partner lacks a steady job ... we lack social support since we live far away from our relatives ... and of course we are also worried about what kind of future would await our children.

“Of course, we are also worried”: this general sense of malaise about the way the world is going may serve to dampen enthusiasm for becoming a parent. Among other Finns surveyed, concerns expressed about immigrants and their impact on the country served the same rhetorical purpose.

In the same collection of comments regarding fertility, a 36-year-old, voluntarily childfree woman related procreation to overpopulation, and asked more provocatively:

Why would I sacrifice my couple relationship, my body, my sleep and my money in order to have one more mouth to feed in this overpopulated world?

Interestingly, having fewer babies in very low-fertility countries is not an ecological adjustment that has been recommended by international bodies or initiatives for directly tackling climate change. Nevertheless, this argument featured prominently in the green and left-leaning public discourse, and in parts of the mainstream media in the 2010s in Finland. For instance, one Facebook post said, “I can now fly to Thailand with better conscience, because I am childfree”, thereby implying that having a child and having an exotic holiday are equivalent variables in the

¹ This and other quotations were collected by the large evening newspaper *Ilta-lehti* in autumn 2019 in connection with a story about falling fertility. The non-representative survey received 432 open responses, which are available upon request from the author.

individual's carbon footprint calculation (I quote freely from memory). By contrast, very few voices in the 2010s in Finland discussed eco-parenting as a sensible way to promote climate-friendly living. Even fewer voices pointed out that raising children also contributes to the economy and to society as a whole.

It is in this culturally quite peculiar context that my own daughter's more optimistic outlook – solve the crisis, so I can have children – sounded encouraging to me.

Have ideals declined similarly elsewhere? Perplexingly, questions about fertility ideals are not regularly asked in international comparative surveys, and comparable data from Nordic countries are lacking. We will have to wait for the next wave of the Generations and Gender Surveys to find out.

6 Gift or sacrifice

Previously, I used to strictly separate the lifestyle and the scarcity answers when trying to grasp why fertility was declining in my home country. Voluntary childlessness is a personal decision and a human right, I stressed, while also emphasising that people's experiences of anxiety, scarcity and uncertainty can and should be addressed with policies.

However, while these positions on childbearing might call for different policy responses, is it possible that they are fuelled by the same underlying cultural and economic forces? Maybe they both reflect a situation in which having children is simply not very trendy, and parenting has lost some of the allure it once had as a path to maturity and self-fulfilment. In some earlier cultures, having a child was perceived as a resource and a sign of strength, and therefore as a stepping stone to adulthood. The Human Resource Database includes a description of an African tribe in which a young woman would always carry a child when she went to visit the neighbouring village. If she did not have a baby of her own at the moment she could borrow somebody else's child for this purpose. In some societies, having a child was the norm for young women, almost like dressing up with the right handbag is currently part of normative femininity. Recently, a Finnish career woman told me that she does not wear her new wedding ring to work because she does not want her boss and colleagues think she could be on the pathway to motherhood.

In this cultural setting, the visibility and attraction of parenting may have weakened among young adults. Moreover, the interdependency and vulnerability at the core of the parent-child relationship can seem overwhelming, both for those who feel uncertain about parenting and for those who do not want children ("Will I be good enough?").

A study from Sweden noted that for childless adults, children are perceived as representing the "non-modern" parts of life – i.e., as burdensome, demanding and not fitting the ideal lifestyle. "The child connotes dependence and responsibilities in a society where independence and self-actualization are highly valued, and may thus be referred to as non-modern" (Bernhardt and Bergnerh 2013, p. 102). The authors

added that most people value parenthood, but strive to postpone having children in order to enjoy “the unrestricted freedom of single life for quite some time”. In focus group interviews conducted for the Family Barometer in 2017, we noted exactly the same attitude among young Finns (Rotkirch et al. 2017).

At a more structural level, we could also say that, the current version of global capitalism is inimical to procreation. As a New York Times article formulated it:

Our workweeks are longer and our wages lower, leaving us less time and money to meet, court and fall in love. Our increasingly winner-take-all economies require that children get intensive parenting and costly educations, creating rising anxiety around what sort of life a would-be parent might provide. A lifetime of messaging directs us toward other pursuits instead: education, work, travel (Sussmann 2019).

The force of other pursuits and rising anxiety noted in that article are echoed in this comment by a 34-year-old Finnish woman, who said that she has had a hard time finding a committed partner, but also pondered whether she would have time for a family:

My work requires me to be constantly available and I am responsible for keeping the shop open – even if that means dropping everything ... If I don't have time at the moment for my friends and my own parents, how would it be with a family and children?

Crucially, the alternative to parenthood – never to have children – appears to have become more thinkable among young adults today than it was among previous generations. This may be the case for both those who cite uncertainty and those who mention lifestyle choices as their reasons for postponing or foregoing childbearing. A telling sign is the use of the word “sacrifice” as a metaphor for becoming a parent, as in the comment by the Finnish woman above. Having a child can be seen as a sacrifice, while remaining childless is associated with having access to the positive aspects of life (sleep, sex, career). In many cultures, the metaphor of sacrifice would have been used for those who forgo parenthood.

It is as if many childless adults are saying: “If I do not get a stable job, or better pay, or more social support, then I'm better off childless”. Such a decision is certainly not for anybody to judge, but it is also an extremely difficult decision to make, as people who choose childlessness cannot know what they are giving up. Furthermore, assessing any opportunity costs in a situation of stress is demanding. Psychological studies have illustrated that experiencing stress and a lack of resources can greatly lower people's capacity to solve problems and think through different solutions, causing them instead to shift to a “tunnel focus” on the perceived threat (e.g., Shafir 2017). While moving to a tunnel focus can help individuals tackle the threat or the challenge at hand, it may increase the risk of overlooking other alternatives.

It would be interesting to know the extent to which people take the opportunity costs between having or foregoing childbearing into account – assuming they are

emotionally capable of doing so. It would also be valuable to study how perceptions of parenthood – i.e., as a burden or a sacrifice, or as a gift and a blessing – have changed over the decades, and to what extent adults think through different options, or avoid making decisions and “sleepwalk into infertility” (Daniluk 2015). What we do know is that the vast majority of parents see having children as extremely rewarding and meaningful, and that these dimensions and experiences are currently not easily transmitted from those who are living with young children to childless young adults.

7 From uncertainty to resilience?

The economic and existential uncertainty accompanying the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to further depress fertility levels in wealthy countries. At the same time, intense and global crises can change perspectives. In an early and funny essay on the impact of the pandemic published in *The Guardian*, Stephen Marche commented that even before the lockdown, “[T]he standard position of my life has been the one I find myself in right now – everyone I know isolated and suddenly broke”. Marche linked the isolation and social fragility of his generation to what he described as a dire need for more solidarity and interconnectedness:

At moments, Covid-19 feels like no more than an allegory for the condition of my generation: we have been inside, behind screens, while a global catastrophe unfolds, since our 20s (Marche 2020).

It is, of course, easy and fully justified to predict that economic hardship will make family formation challenging. But what about the desire to have children, or the value of close family and kin in one’s life? As societal collapse unfolds, values may also shift, at least temporarily. Being reduced to one’s innermost circle may highlight the importance of having such a circle in the first place. The presence of death can also help to draw kin closer together, and boost fertility (see, e.g., Berg et al. 2020). There are already reports that levels of religiosity are higher as a consequence of the pandemic (Gecewicz 2020), and religiosity is, in turn, one of the best-known value predictors for higher fertility (Philipov and Berghammer 2007). In 2020, there have certainly been fewer opportunities to enjoy the “unrestricted freedoms of single life”.

To the extent that the decline to very low fertility levels in some countries reflects a “crisis of intimacy”, the social fabric in some communities may change for the better after the experiences of global solidarity and altruism in 2020. Interdependency and vulnerability may become more widely accepted. I hope that such a shift can provide room for views on families, households and the raising of children to become more relaxed, more cooperative and more community-based – which could, in turn, raise levels of both demographic and social resilience in Europe. Childbearing decisions in wealthy and liberal societies have become squeezed by the pincer grip of raised

expectations and growing uncertainty. So what happens if this world stops, and then restarts?

Acknowledgements

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