4. Struggling with choice: Narrating reproductive practices in Sweden, ca 1940-1960

Anna Sofia Lundgren & Angelika Sjöstedt Landén

Abstract
In this article, we explore what the understanding of ‘choice’ does in a research project with the overall aim of deepening the knowledge of fertility patterns. The expression ‘reproductive choices’ was central to the research project, and the authors were likely, in the first instance, to have taken for granted the discourse on choice as a way to think and talk about reproductive practice. Contextualising and understanding the interviewed women’s choices were important impetuses for the interviews, but we soon found ourselves struggling with some of the underlying assumptions of the project. Interviewees oscillated between an overall unwillingness to talk about marriage and childbearing in terms of choices, and the simultaneous presence of narrated as well as narrating agency. The narratives were primarily organised around two discourses, one discourse on ‘choice’ and one discourse on ‘contentment’. The analysis also engages in methodological reflections, thus including the often supposedly neutral researchers and research agendas in the discussion of the results.

Keywords: discourse of choice, reproduction, fertility, baby boom, narratives
Introduction

— Yes but, after the first child — and you had four — did they just ‘come’ one after the other or did you plan them?
— No, we didn’t, unless my husband did, that’s a possibility […] We still had intercourse, but the children came, it seemed, mostly by chance. But, eh, yes that….
— But was that the reason you had intercourse, to actually…?
— No, not on my part anyway. It was something that just was. Like marriage. It wasn’t anything... (Woman born in 1931, #18)

The quote above is from an interview with a woman born in 1931. She was interviewed about her life as part of a research project about fertility booms and busts in Sweden. The project as a whole comprised case studies carried out in several countries, in different geographical contexts within each country, and it included both quantitative and qualitative data. While the overall aim of the research project was to deepen the knowledge of fertility patterns, the part in which we were engaged was, according to the project description, specifically focused on the “qualitative dimensions of reproductive decisions”. Reproductive decisions, it was stated, had “consequences that went far beyond the individual life choices of the people involved” (emphases added). Such emphasis on decisions and choices was not unfamiliar to the authors of this chapter. Being born in the 1970s, we were raised in what has been described as ‘an era of choice’ in which reproductive decision-making was increasingly being articulated as a political right (Hayden & O’Brien Hallstein 2010:xvi). However, as ethnologists and firmly grounded in a qualitative hermeneutic/poststructuralist tradition, we soon found ourselves struggling with some of the underlying assumptions of the project.

What came forth in the interviews, regardless of whether they were conducted in rural or more urban areas, were the ways in which the participants oscillated between an overall unwillingness to talk about marriage and childbearing in terms of choices, and the simultaneous presence of narrated as well as narrating agency. Positioning oneself as a "choosing subject" often seemed to be desirable. However, as the title of this article suggests, presenting oneself as a choosing subject and giving concrete accounts of life choices that had been made seemed to be somewhat of a struggle.

In this chapter, we will linger on this seeming paradox. We will start out by giving a brief description of how ‘choice’ has been rendered relevant within the research fields preoccupied with ‘reproduction’ and ‘reproduction strategies’.
We will then move on to give a few examples of how this paradox existed in the participants’ narratives, and the way it seemed to urge the participants to construct certain kind of narratives within the research interviews. We will show how the narratives were primarily organised around two discourses, one discourse on ‘choice’ and one discourse on ‘contentment’. However, as important as it has been to point out the two discourses, it has been equally of value to show how they were constantly being manoeuvred. We specifically investigate how using both discourses may lead us to understand how the discourses were intricately involved in the women’s boundary work, supporting the negotiation of distinctions between respectable selves and less respectable others. The aim of the chapter is to show empirically how narrated memories about marriage and childbirth in the 1940s and 1950s were organised around different approaches to reproductive practices. The chapter is built around 25 interviews with women born between 1919 and 1939.

Although it seemed beyond doubt that the collected narratives of childbirth oscillated between (primarily) two different discourses, there is still reason to reflexively and self-critically consider the ways in which the research project itself contributed to its results. We will therefore also engage in methodological reflections, thus including the often supposedly neutral researchers and research agendas in the discussion of the results.

**A discourse of ‘choice’ in studies on reproduction**

The notion of ‘freedom of choice’ has been recognised as inherent in neoliberal discourse in general (Friedman & Friedman 1980; Rose 1993), and has long been central in research to do with consumption of goods and lifestyles, where a notion of a choosing consumer is at the heart of the studied phenomena as well as dominating people’s own accounts of their lives (cf. Featherstone 1997; Gill 2007). Conceptualisations like ‘the discourse of choice’ have also been widely used to point at on-going processes where people are increasingly repositioned as consumers of services rather than clients or patients (Clark, Smith & Vidler 2006; Nordgren 2010) and how they are thereby simultaneously and perhaps unwittingly made responsible for the choices they make or do not make (Bansel 2007).

Within the research fields of fertility and reproduction, most researchers seem to agree that fertility choices in terms of methods of birth control were be-
ing practiced long before the wider introduction of mechanical/chemical contraceptives, but that this probably had no effect on aggregate fertility levels (cf. Kling 2007). In the late 19th and early 20th century, practices of birth control became more and more accepted, the Swedish prohibition and propaganda against contraceptives being lifted in 1938. This increasing acceptance and the new conditions that came with urbanisation are sometimes described as important reasons for the ‘small family ideal’ – encouraging people to control their number of children (in turn resulting in the drastic baby bust of the fertility transition). However, Hayden et al. (2010: xxiii) argue that it was the white, second-wave feminists of the 1960s that first framed the issue of controlled reproduction as a matter of ‘choice’, thus ‘raising a key challenge to the dominant ideology’ that positioned motherhood as the central role for women.¹

Many contemporary studies of fertility and reproduction have identified a specific discourse of ‘choice’ regarding reproduction and parenthood. For example, studies have recognised discourses of choice in ideologies of ‘willed pregnancies’, where women are (problematically) positioned as ‘in charge of’ biological processes (Ruhl 2002: 659) or in the rhetoric of intervention in childbirth (McAra-Couper et al. 2011). When operating in the field of fertility and reproduction, discourses of choice have been found to be highly gendered as well as normative, and a ‘choice’ not to have children is often negatively charged or perceived as suspect, since notions of reproduction are founded on the unproblematised belief that everyone wants children (Ulrich & Weatherall 2000).² At least in Western societies, discourses of choice have also been said to disempower people who are involuntarily childless. If having children is constituted as the result of a free but natural choice, then the incapability of having children needs a (pathologising) medical discourse to become comprehensible, positioning involuntarily childless persons as ‘ill’ and/or as ‘victims’ of medical circumstances (see Greil, 1997; Peterson & Engwall, 2010; Sundby, 1986). In a similar vein, voluntarily childfree women often find themselves struggling with discourses that would position them as selfish, unnatural, cold and self-absorbed (Hayden 2010).

Writing on amniocentesis, Browner and Mabel Preloran (2000: 355) note that naming an act a decision ‘significantly overstates the degree of intentionality’, and they point at rationalising strategies used by the woman in their case in order to handle the ‘choice’.³ They also point at how expressions like “the burden of unwanted decision making” (2000: 368; see also Kolker & Burke 1994)
Struggling with choice

expose ‘the free choice’ to not only be difficult to achieve on equal terms for all, but above all to be a conditioned opportunity that is not always welcome. At the same time, to actively think about practices as results of free choices can be a successful strategy for people who do not wish to take in power-laden aspects of their actions. In writing on cross-border egg donation, Gunnarsson Payne (2013) argues that notions of a free choice were at work on many levels of the process, positioning both donors and recipients as choosing subjects, and thus rendering invisible, or at least obscure, the different (ethnified, classed, gendered) conditions under which choices were made.

As apparent from the above, in most cases where a discourse on ‘choice’ is used as a research tool or is described as an empirical finding, it is emphasised how the neoliberal focus on individual rights makes such discourses problematic in the way they present choosing as a neutral, logical and rationally calculating act, one that is equal for all and is unconnected to social norms, hierarchies, positions and feelings (McAra-Couper et al. 2010; Solinger 2001; Hayden & O’Brien Hallstein 2010). The logic of individualised consumerism that is inherent in the discourse of choice is similarly criticised for blinding us to the cultural aspects of choices: ‘From a postplural viewpoint, the ‘family’ is lifestyle; lifestyle is choice; family-style is a private matter’ (Grace & Daniels 2007: 707).

Most of the studies referred to above are situated in cultural, geographical and temporal contexts that differ decisively from the places and times the women of this study talk about. While being aware of this, one of our arguments in this chapter is that the identification of changing discourses of reproduction sheds light on important aspects of the narratives that constitute our material.

It may come as no surprise that much research on fertility/reproduction and discourse of ‘choice’ has been carried out on experiences of not being able to live up to social norms and personal expectations regarding reproduction, and the measures taken by people who find themselves in such unwanted and sometimes stigmatised situations, regardless of whether it has to do with wanting or not wanting a child. Such research comprises questions of, for example, (in)voluntary childlessness in general (Letherby 2002; Hayden 2010) or more specifically, of egg-donation (Gunnarsson Payne 2013), transnational surrogacy (Krolokke 2012), amniocentesis (Browner & Preloran 2000), abortion (Boltanski, 2013; Borovoy 2011; Brankovich 2001), vasectomies (Terry & Braun 2012), adoption (Jones & Hackett 2012) and sterilisations (Day 2007). Studying situations where norms are challenged – regardless of whether the ones challenging
them do so because they consciously want to or not – is productive not only because it teaches us about important experiences, but also because stories from outside of the centre are informative as to how norm systems work. One may add that such stories produced at the margins are equally involved in the ongoing constitution of the norms as such, but they are still likely to have put words to what is perceived as problematic.

In this text we have analysed narratives of women who from the outset seem to have lived up to the norms of reproduction and motherhood. It is however important to recognise that although the experiences that the interviewed women narrated were located in the past – in an era preceding the ‘breakthrough’ of a discourse of choice (Hayden et al 2010) – the interviews took place in a time when the notion of ‘choice’ had become the norm. This fact opened up interesting analyses of the uses of such discourses.

The construction of womanhood and femininity in relation to reproduction has been such a strong and prevailing discourse. Often when we talk about becoming a woman ‘today’, it is contrasted against the ‘olden days’ where women had limited choices not to become wives and mothers. Research has shown that discussions between spouses about reproductive choices were not very common (Szreter & Fisher 2010), something that obviously contributes to the difficulties of talking about it in terms of choices. However, we hope that our analysis may complicate such polarisation of times and ages. We try to put forward the argument that if we interpret these retrospective narratives about reproductive practices through a current discourse that idealises choice and individuality, we will miss the agency and decision-making that these women actually tell us about. They should not be understood simply as victims of a time that made women passive, nor could we disregard the highly restrictive norms that regulate women’s sexuality and marital obligations that are part of the patriarchal order of gender and power. We rather suggest that the narratives about family, sex, education and work that emerge in the interviews actually tell us something about the norms of our own time as well. It provokes questions of whether there are other ways of imagining subjectivity apart from the polarised positions of women as either ‘objects for reproduction’ or ‘choosing subjects’. We also think that problematising the discourse of choice makes a way into the construction of power orders in terms of class and gender.

Analytically, the discourse of choice is often characterised as an empty signifier, whose emptiness and openness to inscription makes it possible for it to car-
Struggling with choice

ry an excess of meaning, to ‘condense and contain a variety of meanings, motivations and possibilities’ (Clark, Smith & Vidler 2006: 333). This recognition makes the term apt for a study of how choice is continually constructed and filled with meaning as ‘different projects or wills will try to hegemonise the empty signifiers’ (Laclau, 2007: 46). In this sense, the empty signifier of ‘choice’ will attract people to try to fixate its meaning and to become choosing subjects through the use of it. We argue in this chapter that it is important to recognise how research projects take part in the struggle to fixate the meaning of words like ‘choice’ and ‘decisions’, but also how spaces for agency are narratively constructed also within discourses that resist the empty signifier of choice as it has been openly and variably – but still – fixated within the discourse of choice.

Methods, material and theoretical starting points

The analysis is based on interviews with 25 Swedish women who were all born during the last two decades of the fertility transition, the period of declining birth rates that took place in Sweden between 1880 and 1940, and who gave birth in the period between the first peak of the Swedish baby boom in the 1940s and the second peak in the 1960s. The fact that only women were interviewed of course limits the possibility of a more comprehensive understanding. Although the importance of acknowledging women’s roles as decision-makers has been recognised (Mackinnon 1995; see also Emeka 2006; Bumpass 1973; Janssens 2007), the significance of men’s family desires and of masculinity is, needless to say, also pivotal (e.g. Janssens 2007; Kling, 2007; Thomson, McDonald & Bumpass 1990).5

The interviews were semi-structured life story interviews shaped as conversations around a selection of themes (Atkinson 1998; Patton 2002) such as education, work, marriage, contraceptives, divorce, hopes and worries regarding children and childbirth. Although there was a long list of themes to be addressed, the style of conducting the interviews was guided by an attempt for openness for the women to talk about whatever they thought relevant in relation to the themes (McCracken 1991). Questions circled around the women’s families of origin, their education, work, relationships, childbirths and so on, and tried to encourage reflections on thoughts, dreams and feelings, as well as concrete practices.
The object of the narratives that constitute the material for this specific chapter is the time in the women’s lives when they married and had their children. The object of analysis is however not solely the content of the narratives, but rather the narratives themselves. It is how these events were narrated and what this may tell us about the ever on-going cultural constitution of reproductive practices and identities that is the main object.

We were two researchers, born in 1972 and 1979 respectively, who conducted the interviews; most of them individually. On a couple of occasions, however, we carried out the interviews jointly, which gave us the opportunity to synchronise the interview techniques and to discuss common experiences of the construction of data. Each interview lasted between one and three hours and typically took place at the kitchen table in the home of the informant. A couple of interviews were carried out in public spaces like a café or hotel lobby. The locations were decided by the informants. All interviews were recorded and fully transcribed.

One thing that we noticed early on in the readings of the transcribed interviews was that the women’s narratives visualised two different ways of making the issue of ‘having children’ comprehensible. In accordance with our theoretical perspective of discourse theory, we refer to these as partly antagonistic ‘discourses’, and named them a discourse of ‘choice’ and a discourse of ‘contentment’. The basic idea of the discourse theory deployed, is that ‘[m]eaning can never be ultimately fixed’ (Winther Jørgensen & Phillips 2002: 24), but is rather the object of constant struggles. According to this view, discourses constitute established ways in which ‘the flow of differences’ is temporarily arrested or fixated; they constitute ways in which phenomena are made sense of (cf. Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 112). We thus consider the studied narratives as ways of fixating meaning through putting events, practices and identities into words. In accordance with the theoretical perspective deployed, we also take as an important point of departure that such fixations are central to the (re)production of the narrated as well as the narrating identities.

In what follows, we will give empirical examples from the interviews in order to first show the constitutive characteristics of the two discourses that were present in the interviews. We then analyse the material in relation to how the interviewed women challenged the discourses while simultaneously trying to comply with them.
Two overarching discourses: contentment and choice

In the interviews, all women were asked to talk about their thoughts about starting families. What were their hopes for themselves? How did they reason about family making? In what kind of social contexts and life situations were their reproductive decisions made? What alternatives did they consider? The transcribed interviews visualised two dominating ways of making the issue of ‘having children’ comprehensible, each marked by a different vocabulary – in turn positioning the parental subjects as either actively controlling the process or not. It is important to stress that when we talk about and denominate these two discourses, we refer to ways of talking within the context of the interviews. We do not assume that these narrative strategies necessarily correspond to how the women felt or what they wanted within the narrated period of time (even though this is what they talk about).

An explicit discourse of choice was quite unusual and was detected more frequently in the interviews with women with an academic background. It sometimes manifested itself quite obviously:

You know, as a natural scientist you plan. They are born in 1960, ’62, and ’64. (Woman born in 1933, #2)
Yes, I have grown up in that environment. You are not supposed to have pre-marital contact. I stopped caring about that, but I saw to it that I didn’t get pregnant. Dad would not have liked that. No. That’s the way it was. (Woman born in 1931, #20)

In the upper quote, the woman refers to her profession as a biologist in order to explain her need (and capability) to plan. The second quote situates the prohibition against sex before marriage to a specific social class, but simultaneously discloses how this norm could be challenged seemingly easily. This woman also emphasises her own ability to ‘see to it’ that she did not get involuntarily pregnant, revealing a conscious choice and that reproductive decisions were made.

More common, however, were narratives where choices and choosing subjects were not articulated as distinctly. A discourse of contentment comes through quite clearly in the quote below, where Sara, at age 85, told us about the period when she and her husband started their family in the 1950s.

– And then the children came like in a row. We got them in 1954, ’55, ’57. Without any planning whatsoever. It just happened to be that close.
– But did you plan to have children, or how did that work?
– No... [short pause]. We didn’t. They just sort of came. I used a diaphragm after I had the first one of course, but it did not seem to work that well. And then the two other came along as I said, and the last one arrived very surprisingly! (Woman born in 1929, #4).

In the quote, the interviewer used words like ‘planning’ and ‘getting’ (Swedish: ‘skaffa’), when referring to having children. The latter is a common Swedish expression for having children that in meaning comes close to ‘acquire’ or ‘obtain’. Both ‘planning’ and ‘getting’ assume an active subject that controls the process of having children, and possibly decides on when and how many children are born. While ‘planning’ suggests that having a child was carefully arranged to fit other circumstances, ‘getting’ implies an almost consumerist relation to the child – almost as if it was possible to ‘buy’ it.

It was obvious that the interviewee did not buy into the language of the interviewer. First, she explicitly says that her children were not planned, and when she is again asked directly about this, she once again contradicts the suggestion and says that ‘No. We didn’t. They just sort of came’. Here Sara uses the expression that was perhaps the one most frequently used by the women: the children ‘came’, or, on occasion, children were described as something you ‘got’. The ‘getting’, ‘arriving’ or ‘coming’ of the children, in turn, was described as ‘natural’, and were expressions that almost all women used, both when it came to marriage and children.

Yes, and so it came to be that we got married. (Woman born in 1919, #5)
The boys came closely so that... (Woman born in 1926, #3)
It was only natural that you got the children you got (Woman born in 1922, #7)

Even when Sara talks about using contraceptives, she refers to the process in a distancing mode. She states that she used a diaphragm after the first child was born, which suggests that she was in fact taking concrete precautions and did, in a sense, plan her fertility. But when this did not work and she found herself pregnant again just one year after the birth of her first child and then once again, her only comment on this was ‘it didn’t seem to work’, and the fourth child is referred to as having ‘very surprisingly arrived’.

This way of talking opens for a position as passive observer of events, even a victim of circumstances, where the women were seemingly passively exposed to childbearing that they did not necessarily want. Such a position was however
almost always actively countered by the women. Margareta was born in 1922 and had given birth to five children, one of whom died as an infant.

– Yes, but I wanted to ask, after having your last child, did you decide not to have any more, or how did that happen?
– (Laugh). I guess it came to be more or less like that! Yes, it was quite crowded! It was! No, but one is happy for each one of them, one is. Because everyone is welcome, they are. But, surely, it could be a bit much at times... But it has never been that one has thought that there were too many of them either. I don’t think so... (Woman born in 1922 #7)

In the quote above, the interviewer tries to make sense of the fact that the interviewed woman did not have any more children after the age of 36 when her fifth daughter was born in 1958. The first suggestion that is given by the interviewer is that this could have been a choice on the part of the woman and/or her husband, but the interviewer also opens up for another answer by adding ‘or how did that happen’? At first the interviewed woman laughingly complies with the suggestion that this might have been a choice. Her laughter and way of putting it – “I guess it came to be more or less like that!” – however avoids any direct confirmation of the suggestion that it may have been an actual ‘decision’ and apart from the laughter, she includes both the ‘I guess’ and the expression ‘more or less’. She then refers to the crowded living situation in a way that seems to support the idea that this circumstance may have contributed to a choice not to have more children. Having said that, however, she instantly takes it back. Instead she emphasises how ‘one is happy with each one of them’ and that ‘everyone is welcome’. Although she does not position herself as a choosing subject, these assertions that everyone is welcome makes the implicit positioning of her as a victim of many childbirths impossible.

Discourses of choice have been said to be organised by a logic of consumerism that tends to position social context as well as the material body in a different way than does the discourse of contentment. The discourse of choice makes expressions of ‘reproductive rights’ possible and thinkable (cf. Zielinska 2000). It also positions the subject as a consumer who decides what choices are to be made in order to fulfil the subject’s desires and fantasies of a good life. But to position oneself as a consumer also positions the narrator as one who defines areas where choices can be made (cf. Grace & Daniels 2007: 695). It was clear from the interviews that reproduction was an area that was both excluded and
included and open for choices depending on who the subjects and objects of and in the narratives were.

From this first empirical section it may seem as though the two discourses could easily be used to describe a difference between interviewers and interviewees, and to describe historical change in a way that homogenises each era. As will be described below, this was true to some extent. But there was no clear-cut distinction. On the contrary, although a discourse of contentment was the one that seemed strongest in the material (seemed most successful in fixating the meaning of childbearing), it was by no means consistent. Neither was it the case that the discourse of contentment produced unequivocally and passive agents. In what follows, we will look closer at moments within the interviews where distinctions were played out from within the discourse of contentment. While still primarily positioning themselves as ‘non-choosing’, in these moments the women actively worked to make themselves come across as ‘good’ by contrasting their own reproductive practices to the practices of other women.

**Struggling with norms of reproduction**

It has already become clear that although primarily talking from within a discourse of contentment, the women were not always content with how their lives had turned out. Almost all of the women had something in their life-stories that had deviated from the norm or from their own wishes, and they struggled to make sense of those events. Such struggles can be viewed as moments where the contingency of the discourse of contentment became visible. The struggle became all the more striking when the ‘deviances’ were framed by the researchers’ persistant uses of a discourse of choice. So – what kinds of norms did the women seem to process? Three norms were particularly present in the women’s stories. They had to do with number of children, time between births, and age and social status at conception. We will begin with stories about number of children and ideal number of years between births in order to then move on to how age and social status was made meaningful when the women engaged in boundary-work in the next section.
Struggling with choice

The two-child norm
Except for getting married and giving birth, the women’s ideal images of the life-course were strongly connected with an idea that two children was a proper number of children to have.

Yes, well, we had talked about getting married, that we supposedly (nog) should have two children (Woman born in 1936, #13)
Yes, I would have liked to have had two children and preferably one of each [a boy and a girl] (Woman born in 1922, #8)

This is a norm whose reasons, just as all changes in fertility, have been debated (cf. Blake & Gupta 1975; Bean 1983; Sandström 2014). It has also been stated that ‘low ideal fertility is not always a sufficient condition for low levels of completed fertility’ (Emeka 2006: 352). While the two-child norm has been described as peaking with women born in the 1940s, two-child families started to become more common with women born in the late 1930s (Sandström 2014) but had already influenced Swedish couples since the early 1900s (Kling 2007). Lissie Åström (1986:25) describes how ideals for being a woman and mother changed as well as remained stable over the first decades of the 20th century. It was increasingly stated that the young woman had duties towards herself with regards to the children she may mother in the future. The woman therefore needed to ‘care for her bodily and spiritual health’ (Åström 1986:50). This was also what Gunnel, born in 1926, picked up on when remembering how two children were considered an ideal of the 1950s.

It is included in that image that one should not have more than two children, for the woman should be able to feel that, yes, she is taking care of herself, too, a little [...] So that was the fifties. The ideal was to have two children, with three years apart. (Woman born in 1926, #3).

Although the interviewed women often – at least in retrospect – seemed aware of the norms present in society at the time, many of them also recognised that they had themselves sometimes failed to live up to the ideals.

Gunnel had four small children to care for at the same time as she was working full time as a teacher. She describes life with children and work as hard: ‘one was tired all the time!’ She is one of few women who employs a discourse of choice when talking about being newly wedded and short of money:
I suppose we talked about that it was good to wait a couple of years until I had gotten a [work] position. And wait for a few years before we had (fick) children. But of course we wanted children. But, just wait a few years. As far as it was possible. (Woman born in 1926, #3)

From the interview it is obvious that she thought that four children was too many, and when reviewing her life with children she constructs her experience as having nothing to do with choice: 'one could say that if you got (fick) children you got (fick) them. It was not about deciding that we shouldn't have any right now'. But just like Margareta, Gunnel was quick to move away from issues of choices and reasons, and instead emphasised the joys of parenthood.

– We just wanted two, so that...
– And it turned out to be four?
– Yes. It depends, I usually say, it is fun, once you have them it's fun. (Woman born in 1926, #3).

Gunnel admits that life was difficult. She had four children instead of the two that she had hoped for. She describes herself as always tired and at times wondering whether it would be better to give up the work that she had promised her mother to keep. She returns to the hardships of caring for four children several times, but just as often, she finishes with expressions of contentment: 'once you have them it’s fun'.

Throughout the interview, Gunnel is often unable, sometimes unwilling, to represent herself as a subject of choice, except when talking about the plans that she and her husband had to delay childbearing. Her recourse into the discourse of contentment may be understood as her perception of 'how it was', but may equally be an expression of her efforts to represent a good life – in spite of all the hardships. The discourse of contentment, visible in avoidances as well as in explicit reassurances that all went well despite the hardships, stabilises her narrative, but is also constantly undermined by that very story. Gunnel's life may not have been her chosen life, but she is anxious to present it as a 'good enough' life. Fragile as it is, the discourse of contentment renders invisible, or at least less striking, her inability to live up to the norms of choice that surface in the interview.

Another example comes from the interview with Anna-Klara, who was born in 1919. This example also has to do with ideal numbers of children, but here the issue has not only to do with the two-child norm, but rather with the upper limit for the number of children. This limit connected the question of number of chil-
Struggling with choice

dren with how notions of social class, heterosexuality and gender intersect through the doing of respectability. Skeggs (1997:3) argues that ‘respectability has always been a marker and a burden of class, a standard to which to aspire.’ Anna-Klara was a mother of ten and talks about what it was like to have many children in a community where two children had become the ideal.

– Did many of those living around here have children?
– Well... they had one or two.
– Were you the only one that had ten children?
– Yes, that’s right. But you know, it went so well. Yes. They were liked and... yes. They were taught as toddlers to read evening prayer and all sorts of things like that. They were used to doing that. So it was quite natural, it was something natural. And it still sticks I hope! (Woman born in 1919, #5)

Anna-Klara talks about her children as a natural and unplanned consequence of living with her husband, emphasising the bonds between heterosexuality and reproduction. It was ‘not thought through, but it so happened that we were together. You know how it is, right?’ She also told about coming from a family of fifteen children, which she thought was too many: ‘I thought we were far too many siblings when there were fifteen of us.’ In Anna-Klara’s story, she seems aware that ten children was considered a lot. She stresses that although she had ten children she could manage them properly and they were all well behaved, which in her narrative is signified by the Christian practice of prayer and by the explicit comments on other people’s responses to the children: ‘they were liked’. Anna-Klara seemed urged to defend her having had many children. In this case, the importance of highlighting that ‘it all went well’ although she was eventually widowed and was left alone with ten children to care for, emotionally and financially.

Contentment was here ensured by references to how well-behaved her children were. The efforts put into ensuring us that although she had all these children – many more than she said she had wished for – all went well. Anna-Klara repeatedly and actively countered a perceived risk of being defined as lacking in respectability due to the high number of children. Her narrative thereby lay bare how norms of family-size were related to social class as well as to notions of femininity (see Kling, 2007). In this context, engaging in a discourse of contentment may also be a way of constructing respectability (Skeggs, 1997; Åström, 1986), in the sense that it allowed Anna-Klara to take control of a narrative that otherwise risked being hegemonised by a discourse of (failed) choice.
The discourse of contentment, and the reassurances that her children were well-behaved and generally liked, effectively protects her from being positioned in terms of such failure. Furthermore, the material shows that the long tradition of a discourse of shame (Lindstedt Cronberg, 1997; Kling 2007) was being challenged. Shame was by no means invisible in the interviews, but it was often reinterpreted by the women from within the competing discourses of ‘choice’ and ‘contentment’.

‘Three sunny summers between them’

The increased political emphasis of the early and mid 19th century on not only having children but providing them with a proper upbringing, included notions that women’s health should not be broken down by too many childbirths too close together (Åström 1986). The women seemed aware that there were norms regulating how many years there should be between the children.

There should be three years between the children. You should have ‘three sunny summers’ and that was something that came from above. (Woman born in 1926, #3).

The idea that three years between was proper also seemed to work the other way around. It not only protected women from too frequent childbirths, they also stipulated what was perceived as too far between.

Ingrid, born in 1935, talked about how she only wanted two children, not more, due to her experiences of having many brothers and sisters herself. She did indeed also have two children and this comes across as the result of a conscious choice in the interview. In the quote below, the interviewer comments on the fact that there were seven years between the two, indicating that this is quite a lot:

– Yes, there were seven years between your...
– That is relatively far apart?
– That’s relatively far. [The son] started school in the autumn and [the daughter] was born in May.
– Did you plan for seven years?
– No, nothing happened. I guess I had wanted it somewhat earlier, or we had wanted it some years earlier, but it didn’t happen.
– Were you worried then?
– No, not at all.
– What happens happens?
Struggling with choice

– Yes! That’s how it is. You take what’s given to you! (Woman born in 1935, #15)

The interviewer once again introduces a discourse of ‘choice’ when asking about whether the seven years was planned. The woman replies in the negative, thus in a way partly accepting the discursive conditions. But although she is very cautious (‘I guess I had wanted it somewhat earlier’), she still hints at there actually being a ‘choice’ and a ‘plan’, or at least a wish, but that this did not come true.

In the quote one can also see how the woman is downplaying the question about possible worries. Although it is obvious from the interview that she and her husband did not take precautions not to get pregnant, and that they both had wanted another child closer in age to their first child, she persists in her story that this was not a source of concern.

Is this a stance that she takes in the present? Does she take it because she cannot remember any possible worries? Or is she just keeping the interviewer at arm’s length, trying to avoid going into any details about her feelings and into situations in her life when she was vulnerable and did perhaps not live up to her own expectations? Did all such potential concerns vanish once the second child was born? These are all possible interpretations. What we want to point at here is however that throughout the interview this woman avoids articulating responsibility, as it were, for planning reproduction. Other things in her family life are described as ‘chosen’ and ‘decided upon’, but the having of the children is caught up in a vocabulary of ‘having’ children; ‘we had a child’. This kind of language, in turn, may be explained by the well-known uncertainty that surrounds fertility and the difficulties involved in planning precisely. The effect of the chosen vocabulary is that there are no failures involved when things do not go as hoped for. If you ‘take what’s given to you’, you position yourself as subordinate to something else – whether it be destiny, God, a husband, societal norms, chance or biology – but you avoid being positioned as the one failing to deliver what you want (cf. Featherstone 1997).

Contentment and agency: age and social status as signs of respectability

We have shown that the discourse of contentment was strong in the way that many of the women talked about how things ‘just happened’, but in the end turned out fine, and how they always described contentment with what they got. So far it seems that the women seldom talked from within a discourse of choice
when describing their childbearing years. Only quite rarely, and to some extent related to social class positioning, did they explicitly talk about conscious choices, although it was obvious that many of them had taken some kinds of precautions and had tried to regulate the number of children in different ways, regardless of whether this had succeeded or not. Otherwise, it is we as researchers that stand out as the primary introducers of a discourse of choice, thus forcing the interviewees to relate to such a discourse.

Within the discourse of choice, subjectivity and agency is constructed in terms of choosing: making choices is what signals being an active subject, and the subject is held responsible for failures to achieve its goals or wishes. Accepting this presumption has two important implications. First, it supports the notion that the discourse of choice was consistent and that what rhetorically looks like choices — words like ‘chose’, ‘decided’, ‘planned’ and ‘saw to’ — may very well be constructions made retrospectively. We know little about what conditions, demands and circumstances led to the ‘decisions’ being made (Browner & Mabel Preloran, 2000; Szreter & Fisher 2010).

Secondly, it could lead to a conclusion that when the informants reproduced and identified with the discourse of contentment, they positioned and perceived themselves as passive. This is however a simplification of the narratives offered in the interviews. In this section of the text we want to show some examples of how active subjects were constructed in the data, although not through the discourse of choice. Such instances were for example visible when the women talked about failures or wrong ways of doing things. Such instances in the interviews could be conceptualised as stories where one’s own transgressions of norms were rendered respectable by comparing them to others, whose transgressions of norms were perceived to be even greater.

Gerd, born in 1936, had been talking about teenage pregnancies in her circle of friends, and was asked whether she could remember how people talked about these things at the time:

No it was a bit hush-hush, I actually had a cousin that was fifteen when she got... [...] It is very early. [...] She is almost two years older than me, born in 1935 that is. And one thought that that was very early. (Woman born in 1936, #13)

Gerd states, as do almost all of the interviewed women, that it was not morally accepted to get pregnant before marriage or when being too young (in one’s teens). She was saying that her cousin went against the expected pattern when
Struggling with choice

she got pregnant at the age of fifteen and that this was a bit “hush-hush”. But then the story takes a surprising turn.

And then I got nailed myself just a couple of years after. That felt a bit awkward at the time. But still, it was a difference between fifteen and twenty, or nineteen, soon to be twenty. Yes, my twentieth birthday was one month after the birth of my daughter. (Woman born in 1936, #13)

At first instance, Gerd establishes that her cousin’s pregnancy was generally considered to be ‘very early’. Then Gerd got pregnant herself. This felt ‘a bit awkward’ and undermined her position to judge the cousin, and there are moments in the interview when Gerd actually identifies with her. Nevertheless, at the same time, she is careful to point out important differences. Although the timing of her own first pregnancy was both unplanned and inconvenient as her boyfriend (and husband-to-be) had not yet finished school and was still living at home, at least she was in a stable relationship. Further, she points out that although she was herself young at the time (‘nineteen, soon to be twenty’), she was still much older than the cousin who had been only fifteen. While avoiding blaming either her cousin or herself, or holding anyone responsible for the pregnancies, Gerd manages to point out what was justifiable in relation to social status and age. Even though she describes her own unplanned pregnancy as very inconvenient and problematic, the comparison with the cousin makes it possible for her to present herself as respectable. Her narrative lacks all efforts to construct the pregnancy in terms of ‘mistake’ or ‘(bad) choice’, and she never once talks in terms of irresponsibility, either when it comes to her own or her cousin’s pregnancies. She aligns with the discourse of contentment. Still, she manages to draw distinctions between ‘serious’ mishaps and ‘less serious’ ones. This could also be seen as a way of constructing respectability as important and desirable, but also as very fragile. In her narrative she seems aware that ‘it could have been her’.

Another example of that kind of boundary work, by comparing with ‘worse examples’, comes from an interview where Kersti, born 1930, was asked if she used to discuss with her friends or partner about trying to regulate pregnancies, in the light of the stigma that many women referred to regarding getting pregnant at the wrong time and place in life. Kersti replied with a story about the time when she was studying to become a teacher and lived at a dormitory in a town away from home:
No, not even with the room-mate. And still, she got pregnant before she, before we finished the teachers’ seminar. [...] We never discussed (laugh) how to go about things at that time, no. There was no protection, like the pill, at that time either [...] No, we never talked about it. It was something that had to be brought up with a potential boyfriend (laugh). If that was the case. It was taking a chance. Besides, it couldn’t have been fun to come out as a newly qualified teacher and realise that you were pregnant like she did. And I know she tried to hide it as long as she could. So she worked for one term and nobody had a clue, I heard about that later. [...] But then she got married with that man, or guy. So she contacted me and told me about it (Woman born in 1930, #10).

Kersti stated that she did not discuss contraceptives even with her closest friends, and how the shame was strong when things went ‘wrong’ in front of parents, employers and seemingly even friends. She remembers how her friend tried to hide the pregnancy from everyone for as long as possible. After that, she recalls that her friend eventually married the father of the child. Between the lines of this story there is a sense of relief that the narrator was not the one to find herself in the same position as her friend, signalling that such a scenario could have been just as plausible. But although admitting to this possibility, Kersti still assumes the moral authority that comes with respectability (Skeggs 1997) and positions herself as acting in the ‘right way’. Despite the risks, she had not gotten herself pregnant although she also had been in a relationship at the time. Albeit she avoids talking from within a discourse of choice when referring to her own fertility practices, she uses the comparison with the friend to construct herself as following a normative life-script in terms of ‘finishing school first’ and ‘having time to work for a while’ before marriage and pregnancy.

In this section we have seen how the women found possibilities within a discourse of contentment to construct hierarchies between different kinds of reproductive practices. By engaging in comparisons, different kinds of fertility practices were hierarchised and it became possible to construct notions of (failed) respectability without explicitly talking about choices. The referred transgressions of norms (becoming pregnant too early and too young, or with too many or too few years between) certainly constituted important cracks in the norm systems. They make visible, for example, how the normative connection between marriage and childbearing, or the connections between childbearing, age and time were possible to stretch if only certain things were achieved (having a steady partner, for example). The recurring comparisons installed a certain agency into the narratives, where telling the stories of what had hap-
pened to other women also positioned the interviewed women as somewhat more respectable, even in cases where this respectability was clearly and consciously just due to fortunate circumstances.

**Concluding discussion: Methodologies, historical change and the practical uses of discourse**

What we have called a discourse of ‘contentment’ articulated children as something that ‘came’ or that you ‘got’. Children were in most cases described as expected and welcome, sometimes even taken for granted as the ‘natural’ step after marriage or the very reason for marriage (see also Sánchez-Domínguez & Lundgren 2015), but the women seldom verbalised their hopes or expectations in terms of ‘plans’ or ‘choices’; rather ‘things happened’ and one ‘dealt with it the best one could’.

In contrast to the dominating discourse of contentment was a discourse of ‘choice’. This discourse was organised around words like ‘planning’, ‘strategies’ and ‘choices’, and it constructed family formation as an act that was controlled and decided upon by the women themselves (and their husbands) as active subjects. The current increasing presence of such ‘discourse of choice’ and the way it brings out neoliberal positions and understandings of relations has been widely recognised. This knitting of the discourse of choice to present times makes for an understanding of the uses of other discourses as connected to historical periods. Although this may certainly be true in many respects it also carries the risk of disregarding the way discourses work in parallel.

The society that emerged in general in the interviews was a society where having children was a norm that offered few alternatives, both in the sense that not wanting children seemed to be unavailable as a choice, and in the sense that available contraceptive methods were described as unreliable.9 It was also a society where marriage was the prioritised form for creating a family and bringing up children. Becoming pregnant out of wedlock was repeatedly described as stigmatising if one did not have a steady partner to marry once pregnancy was discovered. Although notions of pregnancies as predestined and inevitable had been replaced “by the notion of childbearing as something that could, and should, be controlled” even by the 1930s in Sweden (Kling 2010:167), such norms, of course, limit the ‘choices’ available and may account for the relative absence of a discourse of choice in the women’s narratives. Also, practices of
birth control in a context with no secure methods of contraception, where the results of the efforts may have varied, will probably resist being comprehended as clear-cut choices; the concept of ‘choice’ will cease to be meaningful if the possibility to fulfil one’s wishes is limited.¹⁰ Some researchers have described how discourses of choice may risk producing ‘failed subjects’ in situations where choices are limited, since the discourse bears the promise that you are free to make choices (Bansel 2007: 298). Others have shown how a discourse of choice may materialise through ‘an extensive network of resources’ (Browner & Preloran 2000: 355), where family, friends and one’s community together seem to propel women forward towards what, at least retrospectively, viewed as a ‘choice’ made by the individual woman. Our results point in partly different directions.

What was striking in our material was that the women so often did not construct their actions in terms of choices – failed or succeeded – at all. In fact, they explicitly criticised what could best be described as the effects of a discourse of choice in today’s society, and pointed at the difficulties that supposedly came with having to decide in detail everything in one’s life. In this respect they themselves did not come across as active in their narratives, and it would be easy to think that a dominant discourse of contentment – as it has been described here – implies an absence of choice and agency. Our arguments have however rather been that the women’s employment of the discourse of contentment primarily says something about how they were used to thinking and talking about the hopes, concerns, fears, plans and precautions taken in relation to marriage and childbearing, since it was obvious that measures had been taken to control how many and when children were born. For example, given that marriage was intimately connected to having children it is possible to view the act of marrying as a choice also to have children. Similarly, the stories of contraceptive use clearly suggest that the women were involved in limiting the number of children. Employing a discourse of contentment does thus not mean that these women were passive, but that they did not (always) rhetorically position themselves as active. The discourse of choice is currently strongly connected with middle-class ideals of being a choosing subject. Skeggs (2004; 2011) has argued that the construction of working-class ‘selves’ rather centres around values that do not put individuality and self-fulfilment first: for example ‘caring as an essential way of living with others’. In the interviews we find a range of ways of taking care of the family across class differences, that all comply with the discourse of content-
Struggling with choice

ment. This did not mean that the narratives were not filled with class distinctions and classed stories. But maybe the women were also telling us something about age and ageing when invoking the discourse of contentment. Quite a few times, the women could follow up a statement where they had denied having made a conscious choice with assuring commentaries about the ways of the past: ‘That’s how it was’. By doing so, they were flirting with the contemporary context, making sure that we understood that the selves they talked about were not the exact same selves that were telling the story. These assurances seemed sometimes to be provoked by the questions asked but also by the age of us, the interviewers. In relation to us, the women sometimes took a position as ‘knowing’, either taking it upon themselves to educate us about how it was, or just feeling the need to explain their seeming inability to answer our questions about choices.

Methodologically then, we need to reflect also on how the framing of the project, and the way this framing worked through the interviewers, could have encouraged the narratives about respectability. By departing from within a discourse of choice and asking questions that seem to imply that people’s life developments are the effects of conscious choices, we may possibly have triggered narratives about contentment and the defending of respectability when the women were looking back on their lives. Contentment, in the sense of being satisfied, may also be an effect of the fact that the women were talking to strangers about their lives and the fact that it was a retrospective narrative.

The ideological discourse of choice did not dominate the women’s ways of making sense of having children, but this did not mean that the women who primarily employed a discourse of contentment did not make choices and decisions in their lives. Nor did it mean that these women did not perceive themselves as possessing agency. Rather, agency was intricately constructed within the discourse of contentment. By subscribing to a logic of comparison, the women managed to create hierarchies between themselves and others, who, according to the interviewed women, had ‘too many’ children or had them ‘too young’. The coincidence that they had ascribed their own childbearing suddenly came across as related to agency when articulated in relation to other women’s ‘bad’ reproductive practices. In this sense, referring to other women who – either by choice or by accident – had transgressed the norms of respectability could be viewed as a strategy to position their own practices as less incidental and more choice-like.
Even though there was a tendency that the women either spoke from within a discourse of choice or from within a discourse of contentment, most of the narratives involved an oscillation between discourses of choice and discourses of contentment. This oscillation seemed at least partly due to the impact of the language of the research project that permeated the questions asked by the interviewers and probably, as a part consequence, found its way into the women’s narratives. Often enough it seemed that it was our utilisation of a discourse of choice that triggered narratives where choice was mentioned. Reviewing the research project reflexively makes it obvious that the word ‘choice’ was inscribed in the project’s premises, both literally and by the use of expressions like ‘reproductive strategies’ that prioritise agents’ choices over more structural explanations. The use of the word ‘choice’ was simultaneously an unreflected part of the project idea, of the researchers’ discursive upbringing, but also a consciously chosen word. Trying retrospectively to understand this choice of ‘choice’ from a research point of view, it appears that we thought that by confronting the interviewees with a question where we asked about ‘how they thought when they chose to…’ or whether they ‘planned for’ so and so many children, we wanted to elicit detailed narratives. We wanted to avoid what had often happened in our pilot interviews, where such details seemed oddly forgotten or under-communicated.

Notes

1 See also Bumpass (1973: 68), who highlights the impact of the more effective oral contraceptives as decisive for women’s possibilities to plan pregnancies and motherhood, rather than just trying to avoid unwanted pregnancies. ‘For the first time’, Bumpass writes, ‘motherhood itself is fully a matter for rational evaluation’.

2 This belief is probably based also on the fact that becoming a mother is central to female gender, why the assumption is probably more strongly connected to women than to men. Historically, this presupposed urge for motherhood was comprehended as embedded in female ‘nature’ (Kling 2007).

3 “Representing herself as ‘a victim of circumstances’ who had ‘no choice’ but to agree to amniocentesis provided Isabel a means to extricate herself from this dilemma. Rationalising her decision as being outside her own control enabled Isabel to follow clinical recommendations, gain information, and leave open the option of abortion, while acting according to what she regarded as maternally appropriate behaviour.” (Browner & Preloran 2000: 355)

4 In the material as a whole we also have women who do not have children.

5 With regard to the focus on women’s narratives, this study mainly contributes with knowledge of how the women made sense of gender relations and
gender differences. In an interview study on birth control and abstinence in England, 1930-60, including both male and female respondents, Szreter and Fisher (2010) describe how there was an unspoken assumption that men were responsible for both initiating sex and providing contraception. This suggests that men’s narratives could contribute with accounts of plans and thoughts that guided their practices. In a coming project our plan is to also interview men.

Kling (2010) argues that in the processes of secularisation – and the emerging welfare system where women gave birth in clinics and did not die as frequently during childbirth as they had before – pain was also understood in a different way. Birth pain had been understood as a natural part of life as children were seen as God given. The processes of secularisation and the construction of the welfare state moved the discourse more towards planning and choosing in terms of number of children, but also choosing (how to) relieve pain. The discourse of contentment is not necessarily religious itself, but keeps closer to the idea that children are naturally given and that it is not the individual’s task to decide upon the number of children.

The collected narratives do not tell us much about any violent relationships with men or situations where fertility choices had been taken by the husband in conflict with the women’s own wishes. We cannot know whether this means that they never experienced such violent and forced subordination or if they just did not want to, or could not, talk with us about it.

8 We have chosen the expression ‘transgressions of norms’ (‘normbrott’) since the women talked about them in this vein; as unwanted and unplanned events that did not comply with what was considered ‘normal’ or ‘expected’. ‘Transgressions of norms’ can however also be thought about as challenging the norms, as disturbances or norm-struggles. We conclude that the narrated transgressions were simultaneously important disturbances undermining the impact of the norms.

9 This notion of unreliability sometimes seemed to be used as an explanation not to why the women got pregnant despite the use of contraceptive methods, but to why they sometimes did not use them.

10 On the other hand, women who wanted two children and who ended up having two children were in a position where they in retrospect could use the word ‘choice’ to describe their reproductive practice.
References


Struggling with choice


91
Ageing: Culture & Identity


Sundby, Johanne (1986). Om jag inte har barn – är jag kvinna då? Psykosociala aspekter på barnlöshet. [If I have no children – am I then a woman?] Kvinnovetenskaplig Tidskrift nr 4, 33-39.

Struggling with choice


