

Fertility desires and visions of fatherhood: individual preferences of young heterosexual men in Lithuania¹

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Demographic research on fertility has almost exclusively focused on women, however, men's fertility preferences are equally important to the understanding of the processes and mechanisms that affect fertility. This article analyzes the data from the qualitative study with young (19–34 year old) heterosexual childless Lithuanian men and explores the relationship between fertility desires, visions of fatherhood and perceptions of masculinity. Our results show that independently of whether the study participants have internalized the “male breadwinner” norm, they modelled their fertility desires according to their current financial situation and perceived future income. Their visions of fatherhood were also often framed by the cultural ideal of a man who is strict, tough and is the main family provider. However, the vision of the father who actively participates in childrearing was also common.

Key words: fertility desires, fatherhood visions, masculinity, young men

INTRODUCTION

Both men and women have children, however, historically demographic research on fertility has almost exclusively focused on women (Greene, Biddlecom 2000). Despite the fact that the demographic community has acknowledged the significance of gender systems for demographic processes since the 1980s (Mason 1995), men's reproductive behaviour is still usually studied only in relation to women's reproductive decisions (Pierotti 2013). At the same time men's fertility preferences and their experiences as partners, husbands or fathers have become increasingly recognized as important to the understanding of the processes and mechanisms that affect fertility (Pierotti 2013; Jamieson et al. 2010). It has been also noted that the analysis of men's fertility behaviour should be situated in the broader context of gender relations (Jamieson et al. 2010) and could benefit from the use of theoretical tools studies of men and masculinities have to offer (Pierotti 2013).

Fertility behaviour in European countries has been undergoing important changes during the last couple decades – fertility rates have fallen to extremely low levels, in some cases

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reaching the so-called lowest-low level of only 1.5 children per woman (Billari 2008). Since desired fertility in most of the countries was still higher than 2.1 (the level of fertility needed for population replacement) it has been hoped for some time that purposive family policy measures will facilitate gradual improvement of this situation. However, recent findings indicate that desired fertility might also fall below replacement levels – in German speaking parts of Europe, for instance, it is currently lower than 1.7 for younger cohorts (Goldstein et al. 2004). One of the most recent studies on fertility in Lithuania also found that during the last 15–20 years the average wanted family size among men and women who have / would like to have children has declined from 2.08 children (in 1994–1995) to 1.99 children (in 2010, age group 18–49) (Stankūnienė et al. 2013). The average desired family size is currently lowest among younger cohorts, especially men – in the age group 20–29 (all population) it was 1.64 children in 2010 (Stankūnienė et al. 2013). These negative trends call for a thorough analysis of the attitudes and meanings young people assign to the desired family size and parenting. Since men's desires and attitudes have been largely neglected in both European and Lithuanian contexts, analysis of the preferences of young men is especially important.

Demographic studies rely extensively on quantitative methodology, consequently, the overwhelming majority of demographic research on fertility and family issues in Lithuania come from quantitative surveys (Stankūnienė et al. 2013; Bučaitė-Vilkė et al. 2012; Stankūnienė, Maslauskaitė 2009; Stankūnienė, Mitrikas 1997). However, information acquired through surveys is usually quite general and insufficient for the analysis of men's experiences and development of qualitatively new insights. In this article we present the results from our qualitative study with 19–34 year old childless heterosexual Lithuanian men. By employing studies of fatherhood, men and masculinities to the analysis of men's fertility desires, we aim to 1) reveal the content of fertility desires and visions of fatherhood of young heterosexual men; 2) analyse the relationship between fertility desires, visions of fatherhood and individual perceptions of masculinity.

HEGEMONIC MASCULINITY AND VISIONS OF FATHERHOOD

One of the most common terms used extensively in studies on men is “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell 1987). Based on Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony the term of hegemonic masculinity was developed by R. W. (now Raewyn) Connell and is defined as “the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee) the dominant position of men and the subordination of women” (Connell 2005: 77). Hegemony also pertains to power and ideology and signifies what is “taken-for – granted” or “common sense” (Hearn 2009: 14). In studies of men hegemony can be used in different ways as: “hegemonic heterosexual masculinity”, “male hegemony”, “the hegemonic male”, “hegemonic men”, “hegemonic male sexuality” and “hegemonic masculinity” (Hearn 2009). We use the term “hegemonic masculinity” as it is used most often.

In Western countries hegemonic masculinity manifests itself through heterosexuality, aggression, authoritarianism and competition – characteristics that are considered as desirable masculine traits (Connell 2005). In Lithuania the most important qualities of a “normal man” are considered to be ability to earn money, ability to do “manly” household chores, provision for one's children and child-rearing, protection of one's woman (Tereškinas 2004). Hegemonic masculinity functions as a cultural norm so even men who do not possess these normative masculine characteristics may also aspire to this ideal (Connell, Messerschmidt 2005). Norms of masculinity are usually internalized and rarely questioned (McNay 1999).

Hegemonic masculinity pertains to all aspects of men's lives including family life. Here men have the privilege to concentrate on the breadwinner role and be carefree (Hanlon 2009), leaving child-rearing for women as primary caregivers. Recently, however, men in Western countries have more opportunities (e. g. through parental leave) and are more often expected to engage in childcare. This has led to the discussion of the emergence of the "new fatherhood" – the model of the father who rejects discipline, is sensitive, caring and is oriented towards establishing a non-hierarchical relationship with a child (Griswold 1993). Consequently, it is assumed by some scholars that these new practices of fathering have transformed hegemonic masculinity, which now includes traditionally feminine qualities (Doucet 2006).

The study of new fathering practices in Lithuania has found that men who have taken parental leave have slightly modified their perceptions of normative masculinity by incorporating childcare as part of normal masculine activities (Tereškinas 2006). However, they still emphasized the role of breadwinner and childcare was seen as primarily woman's activity. This type of masculinity was termed "hybrid masculinity" (Tereškinas 2006: 95). It is unclear how widespread hybrid masculinity is in Lithuania, but other studies indicate that the distribution of childcare and household tasks among men and women remains unequal in the majority of Lithuanian families (Kraniauskas 2009; Maslauskaitė 2008; Gečienė 2008).

DATA AND METHODS

The article analyzes 39 semi-structured interviews with 19–34 year old heterosexual childless men. The length of the interviews ranged from 38 minutes to 4 hours 40 minutes, the average duration of the interviews was 1 hour 59 minutes. The largest part of the interviews was conducted in June–October 2013, the remaining few interviews were conducted from November 2013 to January 2014. The interviewees were selected by methods of targeted selection and snowball sampling, keeping in mind the goal of maximizing variation in socio-demographic characteristics. Young men from Lithuanian cities (including 5 largest ones – Vilnius, Kaunas, Klaipėda, Šiauliai, Panevėžys) and countryside participated in this research. They had the following education: 22 men – university education, 11 – secondary, 1 – high school professional, 3 – professional, 1 – higher non-university, 1 – advanced vocational education and training. 7 study participants were married, 17 had a girlfriend (5 of them cohabited), 15 were single (1 of them was divorced).

Issues that were discussed during the interviews included interviewees' family of origin, interviewees' perceptions of masculinity, intimate / romantic relationships, sexual / reproductive behavior, plans for career, family and children, general attitude towards life. To secure their confidentiality, the names of the study participants were changed.

YOUNG MEN'S FERTILITY DESIRES

The majority of study participants have stated that they would like to have children at some point in their life. Having ascertained the views of our interviewees about having children in general, we specifically asked how many children they would want to have if they decided to have them and why. This strategy enabled individual meanings and reasoning behind the ideal family size to emerge.

Most interviewees have indicated that they would like to have two children. Two children in a family were perceived as an "optimal number". Firstly, study participants considered this setting to be a favorable environment for children themselves, mostly because it was assumed

that having a brother or a sister would enable a child to interact with another child, to learn to share, take care of others. More straight forward emotional reasoning, such as having a playmate, was also common, as voiced by one of the interviewees: “one [child] will feel sad” (Raimis, 19 years). Typically, the interviewees, who came from larger families or had at least one sibling, emphasized these emotional and personality development benefits of having a sibling for a child. Secondly, the term “optimal” was also used to refer to financial resources needed to raise children. The interviewees usually perceived the family of three or more children as requiring significantly more economic resources:

Dagnis: Well, I / it’s just that since I grew up in a family with three children, I think, well, it is maybe a little bit nicer, nicer for a child to have a brother, a sister. Perhaps two children is an optimal number.

Interviewer: “Optimal” in what sense?

Dagnis: Well, I think, that it is best for children themselves <...> when I look at my <...> let’s say, economic situation, I couldn’t have some five children, because, possibly, I just wouldn’t be able to provide for them with my income. / <...> One child, anyhow, perhaps it is important for him, for the child to have the chance of caring for someone else, playing, being friends [with someone else] and so on in the family (30 years).

When explaining lowering fertility levels in European countries, demographers often turn to the theory of the second demographic transition. According to this theory, the decrease of fertility rates below population replacement levels, accompanied with family transformation (the spread of cohabitation, increased rates of divorce), was facilitated by structural and technological changes, but was mainly caused by the change in value systems (van de Kaa 2002; van de Kaa 1987). The author of this theory believes that major changes have occurred in the cultural sphere, specifically in the realm of “what people want out of life” (van de Kaa 2002: 24). Self-realization has become one of the most important goals for individuals, therefore, childbearing decisions are made bearing in mind the effect of a/additional child might have on individual’s freedom and available economic resources. Relatively high “costs” of children in modern societies coupled with the fact that emotional needs and feelings of fulfillment associated with being a parent might be satisfied having just one child point towards the preference for only one child:

Gailius: For me one [child] would be enough, but my girlfriend pictures that [we will have] two / maybe even three. But I think that three is definitely too many. I guess, two. Though for me, I say, one [child] would be already enough. One, two.

Interviewer: Why too many? Three?

Gailius: Well, what about taking care of them – how much space one must have, how much money, how much nerves and energy, and everything one must have! I don’t know. I always think in that direction and not that “oh, a big family” <...> and anyhow, if you want to support [a family of] three children, you have to get a good European salary (22 years).

As illustrated by the previous quotation, often interviewees were not sure about the exact number of children they would like to have and thus would usually deliberate between two possibilities – one or two children and two or three children. In both cases our interviewees have stated that the most decisive factor of the actual number of children they would eventually have would be available resources. Economic resources were mentioned most often,

but other forms of resources, such as “time” and “energy”, were also considered: “not more than two, because I myself grew up in a large family, so.. / actually, it is very difficult with a lot of children <...> maintenance is much more difficult <...> also time, because having many children takes all [your] time <...> looking back on my own parents, well, mother has never worked” (Kajus, 24 years). In the case of Kajus, who has three siblings, experience of hardship and economic deprivation during childhood played an important role in lowering his current fertility desires.

The importance of economic resources to childbearing decisions in Lithuania has been demonstrated in a couple of fertility studies (Stankūnienė, Baublytė 2009; Tereškinas, Purvaneckienė 2012). For instance, research based on the first wave of the international survey “Generations and Gender”, conducted in 2006, suggests that economic conditions are among the most important obstacles to the realization of procreational intentions in Lithuania (Stankūnienė, Baublytė 2009). As mentioned before, our study participants also stressed the significance of different economic resources – not only financial resources, but also living arrangements and employment conditions: “I imagine that I will want to have children when I have a stable job, a stable home and am able to support my family, provide for them” (Algis, 20 years). These views correlate with features of normative masculinity in Lithuania as abilities to earn money and provide for one’s children are considered to be among the most important qualities of a “normal man” (Tereškinas 2004). Hegemonic masculinity functions in such a way that it puts pressure on men to conform to certain ideal of masculinity. Consequently, men who internalize this norm, feel responsible for the financial situation of their current or future families and often fear that a large family would be too much of a burden. At the same time, even participants who were critical of the “male bread-winner” norm and societal pressure for men to be the main providers have still modelled their fertility preferences according to their current financial situation and perceived future income.

YOUNG MEN’S VISIONS OF FATHERHOOD

In studies of fatherhood it is common to ask men about their perception of good or ideal father and visions of future fathering experiences. It is assumed that these images can indicate how men are prepared to have a child and might influence later fathering practices (Marsiglio, Hutchinson 2002: 178). It is, therefore, important to study them.

The reflexivity of study participants in relation to visions of fatherhood varied considerably. Some have mentioned only a couple features of “good father” and stated that they cannot imagine themselves as a father. Their visions of fatherhood, therefore, were quite abstract: “One just should be good <...> spend time [together] – find a common hobby, something common and afterwards everything just falls into place by itself” (Raimis, 19 years). Usually, these interviewees were also less reflexive in relation to other questions of the interview, especially on the subject of masculinity. Other study participants spoke about their visions in more detail and mentioned being caring, responsible, spending time with a family as qualities that a father should possess. They thought that it is important to spend time with a child and, thus, establish a friendly relationship with him / her in order to be a good father. Being caring and responsible was associated with financial support for the family and children.

When contemplating on the visions of a good father the study participants based them on examples from their close environment. Those who had a good relationship with their own father considered him to be an example of a good father even if some of his features were assessed critically, for instance, strictness. Often interviewees tried to combine different

features of an envisioned father: “Caring, strict, forgiving, just, I don’t know if the things I’ve named contradict each other, but / maybe [they] are compatible somehow” (Naglis, 21 years). Frequently, strictness, strength in character were also perceived as masculine qualities: “Strict, / also gentle, to his partner, of course, // self-controlling <...> [one shouldn’t] burst out, attack, start shouting, start fights” (Tauras, 32 years). This point of view was common among those participants who were less critical of masculinity norms in the Lithuanian society. They also associated fatherhood with masculinity. Some participants founded their views on essentialist beliefs, stating that based on natural differences among men and women, mother’s and father’s functions in childrearing differ. This way the role of the mother as a primary caregiver was established and her tenderness was contrasted with father’s strictness, toughness: “<...> mother is warmth and tenderness and / compassion, father – strength and a little bit of strictness, discipline, but also love, and also [he is] understanding, and communicative” (Nedas, 29 years). This might indicate the persistence of values associated with a patriarchal father. A patriarchal father and a father-breadwinner usually were characterized by discipline and limited emotional expression (Chambers 2012; Griswold 1993).

We also asked our study participants whether they would take a paternity leave once they have a child / children. We wanted to find out their perceptions towards equal distribution of childcare chores, the goal that is advocated by different social policy theorists. It is important to guarantee equality among men and women not only in the public sphere but also in private life and equal distribution of childcare activities would advance this cause (Mackevičiūtė, Reingardienė 2006). Many study participants have indicated that they would take a paternity leave and would share childcare chores with their partner / wife, but their perceptions of equal childcare distribution differed. Some of the youngest participants, for instance, envisioned a paternity leave and childcare in the way that an outsider most probably would not consider to be equal:

“Well of course I would use this opportunity to take a vacation², maybe I would spend more time with family, / I don’t know” (Adas, 19 years).

“[I would associate fatherhood] with taking care of your children, giving them enough attention (I would define “enough” as // well, a couple of hours per day). I would say it’s something like an evening [spent] with family or some weekend days. So. But fatherhood would be taking care of your children and doing an equal share of childcare, like mother” (Joris, 19 years).

Analysis of the interview data revealed that interviewees’ visions of fatherhood and perceptions of masculinity were closely related – individual visions of fatherhood were often framed by the cultural ideal of a man who is strict, tough and is the main family provider. Despite the prevailing vision of the father-breadwinner, the vision of the father who actively participates in childrearing was also common.

CONCLUSIONS

Analysis of the data gathered during the qualitative study with 19–34 year old childless heterosexual Lithuanian men revealed that individual fertility desires and visions of fatherhood can be closely related to perceptions of masculinity. One of the features of normative masculinity in Lithuania is the expectation that a man will be the main provider for the family. The

² In Lithuanian “paternity leave” translates as “paternity vacation”.

young men in our study, who supported this norm, felt responsible for the financial situation of their current or future families and often feared that a large family would be too much of a burden. However, even participants who were critical of the “male bread-winner” norm have still modelled their fertility preferences according to their current financial situation and perceived future income. The interviewees’ visions of fatherhood were also often framed by the cultural ideal of a man who is strict, tough and is the main family provider. However, the vision of the father who actively participates in childrearing was also common.

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Prokreacinės preferencijos ir tėvystės vizijos: jaunų heteroseksualių vyrų Lietuvoje atvejis

Santrauka

Demografiniuose gimstamumo tyrimuose paprastai pagrindinis dėmesys skiriamas moterims, nors vyrų prokreaciniai lūkesčiai taip pat svarbūs siekiant suprasti gimstamumą veikiančius procesus. Straipsnyje analizuojami kokybinio tyrimo su Lietuvoje gyvenančiais heteroseksualiais 19–34 metų amžiaus vyrais, neturinčiais vaikų, duomenys, siekiama atskleisti prokreacinių lūkesčių ir tėvystės vizijų sąsajas su vyriškumo sampratomis. Tyrimo rezultatai atskleidė, kad nepriklausomai nuo to, ar tyrimo dalyviai internalizavo vyro – šeimos maitintojo normą, prokreacinius ketinimus jie modeliavo atsižvelgdami į savo dabartinę finansinę padėtį ir numanomas ateities pajamas. Jų tėvystės vizijos formuotos tiek griežto, disciplinuojančio, šeimą aprūpinančio vyro idealo, tiek aktyviai dalyvaujančio vaikų priežiūroje tėvo pagrindu.

Raktažodžiai: prokreaciniai lūkesčiai, tėvystės vizijos, vyriškumas, jauni vyrai