

Summary of the thesis:

Rising Economic Uncertainty and Changing Partnership Patterns: The Roles of Unemployment, Subjective Perceptions, and Social Parenting in Norwegian Fertility Dynamics

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Declining fertility rates and rising childlessness form the central background for this thesis. These trends have become prominent in wealthy societies, particularly across OECD countries, since the turn of the millennium. Norway was once among the countries with the highest fertility rates in this group, but recent years have seen a sharp decline. In 2024, Norway's total fertility rate (TFR) stood at 1.44 children per woman—a drop of 0.5 since 2009, placing Norway below the OECD average and marking a historical low in the national context.

Alongside falling fertility, childlessness has increased notably. Among Norwegian women aged 45, the proportion remaining childless rose from 9% in 1994 to 13.4% in 2024. For men, the trend is even more pronounced: the fraction of childless men at age 45 jumped from 13.2% to 23.8% over the same period.

These shifts raise important questions about why younger generations in Norway are having fewer children and delaying or forgoing parenthood than previous cohorts. The aim of the thesis is to provide insight into the mechanisms behind new patterns in fertility and childlessness in contemporary Norway. Several major demographic and structural shifts have paved the way for these recent dramatic changes in fertility.

The thesis is structured into an introductory chapter and five distinct articles. These articles explore how demographic trajectories—manifested in new partnership patterns—and structural changes—leading to increasing economic uncertainty—influence the recent development in fertility in the Norwegian context. Together, the articles provide new insights and a deeper understanding within an already well-established research field.

The articles themselves can be categorized into several dimensions, and thematically they are divided into two groups. Articles 1, 2, and 3 center on economic uncertainty—spanning unemployment, perceived financial futures, and broader job-market conditions—and how it influences fertility. Articles 4 and 5 focus on new partnership forms, examining how social parenthood, defined as living with a partner who has children from a previous relationship, relates to childlessness.

Although all articles focus on fertility, different measures are used. Articles 1 focuses on birth rates, Article 2 on fertility intentions, and Article 3 connects fertility intentions with subsequent childbearing decisions. Articles 4 and 5 focus on the absence of childbearing, investigating the probability of childlessness. The articles can be summarized into five research questions and main contributions:

What is the relationship between individual and aggregated unemployment and fertility during 1994–2014 in Norway?

The *unemployment and fertility* article [1] analyzes how unemployment influences fertility, using two indicators: individual unemployment status and the municipal unemployment rate. The findings of this article show that both measures are linked to lower birth rates—people who are unemployed and those living in municipalities with higher unemployment have fewer births. However, for mothers, individual unemployment is positively associated with higher order births. The study's main contribution is to show that unemployment delays the transition to a first birth, while its impact on higher parities varies by gender and that individual unemployment matters more than aggregated unemployment. The article deals with the theoretical questions about whether the relationship between fertility and employment has become more similar over time for both men and women. By demonstrating how economic uncertainty, measured through individual and municipal unemployment, raises the opportunity costs of childbearing, delays first births. It also reflects the gendered dynamics predicted by the Second Demographic Transition, where increased female labor participation leads to differing fertility responses between men and women.

How do perceptions of the future economy influence fertility intentions?

The *narratives and fertility* article [2] analyzes how perceptions of the future economy—both positive and negative—shape couples' intentions to have children using an experimental design. In an experimental data collection, couples were presented different scenarios of the future economy before they answered the questions independently of each other about fertility intentions. The study shows that those exposed to a negative economic scenario have lower fertility intentions than those exposed to a positive scenario or those in a control group not exposed to any scenario. This contributes to the literature by providing strong internal validity to causal claims on the impact of economic uncertainty on fertility intentions. In addition, the gender perspective in the article provides insights on whether the impact of economic uncertainty on fertility differs between men and women, showing that men and women responded in similar ways to the scenarios.

This article expands on Mills and Blossfeld's globalization-of-risk framework, which argues that increasing economic risks and uncertainty due to global interconnections make life decisions like having children more complex. It shows that beyond objective conditions, individuals' perceptions of economic stability influence family planning decisions, reflecting the increased complexity and uncertainty in life-course choices.

How does subjective economic uncertainty shape fertility intentions and behavior?

The *subjective uncertainty and fertility* article [3] analyzes how subjective economic uncertainty influences fertility intentions and behavior when objective economic uncertainty is accounted for. The study contributes to the literature by showing how different measures of subjective economic uncertainty relate to fertility. The longitudinal data allows both exploration of how these measures aligns with fertility intentions, as well as how those intentions translate into behavior. Here, similarly to the *narratives and fertility* article [2], the article raises theoretical questions about how subjective feelings of economic hardship influence fertility decisions, beyond just objective financial measures. In a world with interconnected economies and more constant uncertainty, individuals' perceptions of risk—shaped by global economic instability—play a crucial role in shaping family planning and life-course decisions, in accordance with Mills and Blossfeld's globalization-of-risk

framework. In the article, those who reported difficulty making ends meet were less likely to plan or have a child. This feeling of financial struggle was a stronger predictor than income itself. Other worries about future finances or the overall economy did not significantly affect fertility. Overall, the article discovered no gender differences along these measures.

What role does social fatherhood play in men's childlessness?

The *social fathering and childlessness* article [4] examines the relationship between men having experience of social fatherhood (living with a female partner who has children from a previous partnership) and childlessness. Childlessness is typically defined in demographic research as the absence of biological or adopted children, but this definition overlooks roles like social parenting or step-parenting. The main contribution of this study is showing how men who have experience living with a partner who has a child from a previous partnership have higher childlessness rates than those without such experience. This challenges the assumptions that childlessness is solely a result of selection into partnerships or a choice against having biological children and suggests that social fathering can be a substitute for biological parenthood for some men. With a life-course perspective, where we emphasize how the timing, sequence and social context of life events shape individuals' trajectories over time, the article highlights how earlier experiences and roles can influence their later decisions and outcomes. Here, those outcomes include those related to family formation and fertility. Applying such an perspective to social fathering helps explain how men who live with a partner's children from a previous partnership may have different pathways and motivations regarding biological parenthood. More specifically, with such a theoretical perspective the article highlights how their experiences as social fathers can shape their identity and choices, potentially leading to higher rates of childlessness compared to men without such experiences.

Is social parenting a pathway to childlessness among men and women in Norway?

The *social parenting and childlessness* article [5] examines the relationship between social parenting and childlessness, including a gender perspective looking at both men and women. A key contribution is showing that social parenting is linked to a higher chance of remaining childless for both genders, though the effect is stronger for men. Men who have experienced social parenting are more likely to remain childless compared to women in similar situations. Economic uncertainty, through unstable jobs and insecure income, further amplifies this link but affects men and women differently. For men, financial instability makes childlessness even more likely. For women, its impact is less clear and, in some cases, may even lower the risk of remaining childless. Similar to the *social fathering and childlessness* article [4], this article brings up the theoretical question of how earlier partnership experiences influence later fertility outcomes—however, it also brings in a gender perspective by including both men and women. Theoretically, one could expect that the way men and women navigate social parenting and economic uncertainty differs, as they are shaped by enduring gender roles around caregiving and financially providing for the family.