

# *Social Fathering and Childlessness – The role of Economic Uncertainty*

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In this paper we investigate the relationship between social fatherhood, economic uncertainty and childlessness among men in Norway. The backdrop for this is the rising level of childlessness among men in Norway as well as in many other rich countries. In Norway, 25% of men in 2021 did not have a biological child at age 45 and similar numbers for women are 14%. The gender gap in childlessness have widened from 5.8 to 10.2 percentage points over the last 15 years (Statistics Norway 2022). This calls for more research on the mechanisms behind men's childlessness.

We will focus on the role of men's partnership histories including social fathering for the chances of remaining childless and whether this differs among men experiencing different levels of economic uncertainty. A social father is here defined as a married or cohabiting partner of a child's biological mother to whom the child is not biologically related (Berger et al. 2008). There is an increasing number of men spending time as social fathers. Across the last decades family structures have gone through significant changes resulting in more unstable marriages, higher union dissolution rates and more repartnering. Consequently, more men will enter partnerships which the woman already has children. It has been found that men who have experience as social fathers are more likely to end up childless than men that are or have been in partnership but without the experience as social fathers (Kristensen & Lappegård).

In this paper, we extend the research on the relationship between social fathering and childlessness by asking whether economic uncertainty has a moderating effect on the relationship. Using administrative register data from Norway with information about partnerships, childbearing, and employment histories, we will focus on men that have been in a partnership (cohabitation or marriage) and investigate whether the relationship between social fathering and childlessness differs depending on whether they have experienced economic uncertainty or not.

## Theoretical considerations

Social fathering is part of men's partnership status and histories, which have been found to be a substantial predictor of childlessness (Hart, 2019; Jalovaara & Fasang, 2017). Most research on fertility focuses on biological parenthood, which means that we ignore significant family ties where childless individuals are included into pre-existing families through step-parenting or social parenthood (Jalovaara & Fasang, 2017). Social fathering has been found to be associated with childlessness, but certain "types" of social fathers are much more likely to be so than others (Kristensen & Lappegård). Namely those that have a complex partnership history and those entering a partnership at 'older' ages.

Our research question is whether economic uncertainty has a moderating effect on the relationship between social fathering and childlessness. We measure economic uncertainty as employment instability, meaning to what degree the men have had a stable and consistent employment career. Previous research suggests that unemployment and low-paid jobs are associated with childlessness (Berrington, 2017; Keizer et al., 2010). The same is having an unstable employment career with many interruptions (Keizer et al., 2008; Tölke & Diewald, 2003). There may be several reasons why socioeconomic disadvantages and employment instability is associated with childlessness among men. Following the economic uncertainty – fertility argument, people will postpone or avoid having children until they can provide for them economically (Kreyenfeld, 2016). How long people will experience economic uncertainty varies. For instance, due to changes from in the economies of Western countries resulting from globalization and automation of production, young adults with low education levels are facing more obstacles when trying to become a stable earner, compared with their more highly educated peers (Cherlin, 2016; Mills & Blossfeld, 2003).

Following an economic provider argument, men that are more disadvantaged economically speaking are considered less attractive for women who want children (Becker, 1991). This may still be a relevant argument in a setting such as the Norwegian one, with a growing dual-earner family structure where both parents take responsibility for contributing to the financial support of their household and caring for children. In such a case, men experiencing employment instability may have more difficulties fathering a child.

We argue that economic uncertainty could moderate the effect of social fathering on childlessness. That is, for men with a stable employment career, social fathering would have a weaker positive relationship with childlessness than for men with an unstable employment career. Among these men the chances of remaining childless would be even larger.

## Analytical framework

For this study we use administrative register data for all men living in Norway during the period 2006-2022. In 2006, information about couples cohabitating without a joint child was included in the registers. This means that from 2006 and onward we have access to complete partnership histories as well as complete fertility and employment histories. We also link information on educational attainment from additional administrative registers.

In order to have data that shows partnership histories as complete as possible, we include men born in 1980 in our sample. For these cohorts, we have complete partnership histories from the age of 25 years. This means we can investigate the relationship between partnership histories and childbearing at age 42. The rich information on partnership histories, which also includes social fathering, covers a period of 18 years.

We exclude men who have never been in a partnership from our investigation and will only look at men that are or have been in a partnership. We do this to be able to compare men that have similar partnership histories but where some have experience as social fathers and other not.

To identify patterns in partnership histories including social fathering, data will be organized into clusters using sequence analysis. For the sequence of partnership histories, we will distinguish between never partnered, partnered without social fathering, partnered with social fathering, previously partnered without social fathering, and previously partnered with social fathering. We distinguish social fathering from other partnership patterns based on whether the female partner has a child from a previous relationship in her current relationship. Social fathering is conditioned on partnerships and this distinction is only applied to partnered men. Following Jalovaara & Fasang (2017), we choose to distinguish between never partnered and previously partnered, as whether a person never has had a partner is significant for whether they have been able to enter parenthood. We will use men's employment histories to create a variable for measuring employment stability meaning we will count the time the men have been employed or enrolled in education.

We will run linear probability models using the probability of being childless at age 42 as the dependent variable. Our main variables of interest are partnership histories and employment stability. To answer whether the relationship between partnership histories is moderated by employment career stability, we will include an interaction between this variable and partnership histories. We will also control for immigrant background and educational attainment.

## Research contribution

This study will contribute to the research field in several ways. It delves into the growing issue of male childlessness, illustrating its ties to social fathering roles and economic stability. It suggests that the rise in childlessness isn't merely a personal choice, but a societal concern with implications for future planning and policy. The study will give better understanding of why some men are more likely to remain childless. Lastly, it can shed new light on why childlessness has increased rapidly among men.

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