

Uncertain about childbearing

The role of sociodemographic background, attitudes and values in explaining uncertainty among low-parity Finns

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Background

Studies on fertility intentions typically focus on stated childbearing goals and how these relate to fertility desires and actual childbearing. Less attention has been paid to those who do not declare any intention or are unsure about their intentions (but see Bernardi et al. 2010; Sobotka 2009; Smallwood & Jefferies 2003; Morgan 1981 and 1982).

While uncertainty about future childbearing increases when one has attained a minimal acceptable number of children (Morgan 1982), recent surveys indicate that 'don't know' responses are common among young Europeans already at low parities (e.g. Testa 2006). In Finland, uncertainty is quite common among low parity Finns (Figure 1). On average, one in four men and one in five women with no or only one child are unsure if they wanted to have a(nother) child. Uncertainty is more common among those who did not currently live in a union. However, as many as 17% of men and 16% of women living in a union were uncertain about their intentions.

Research task, data and methods

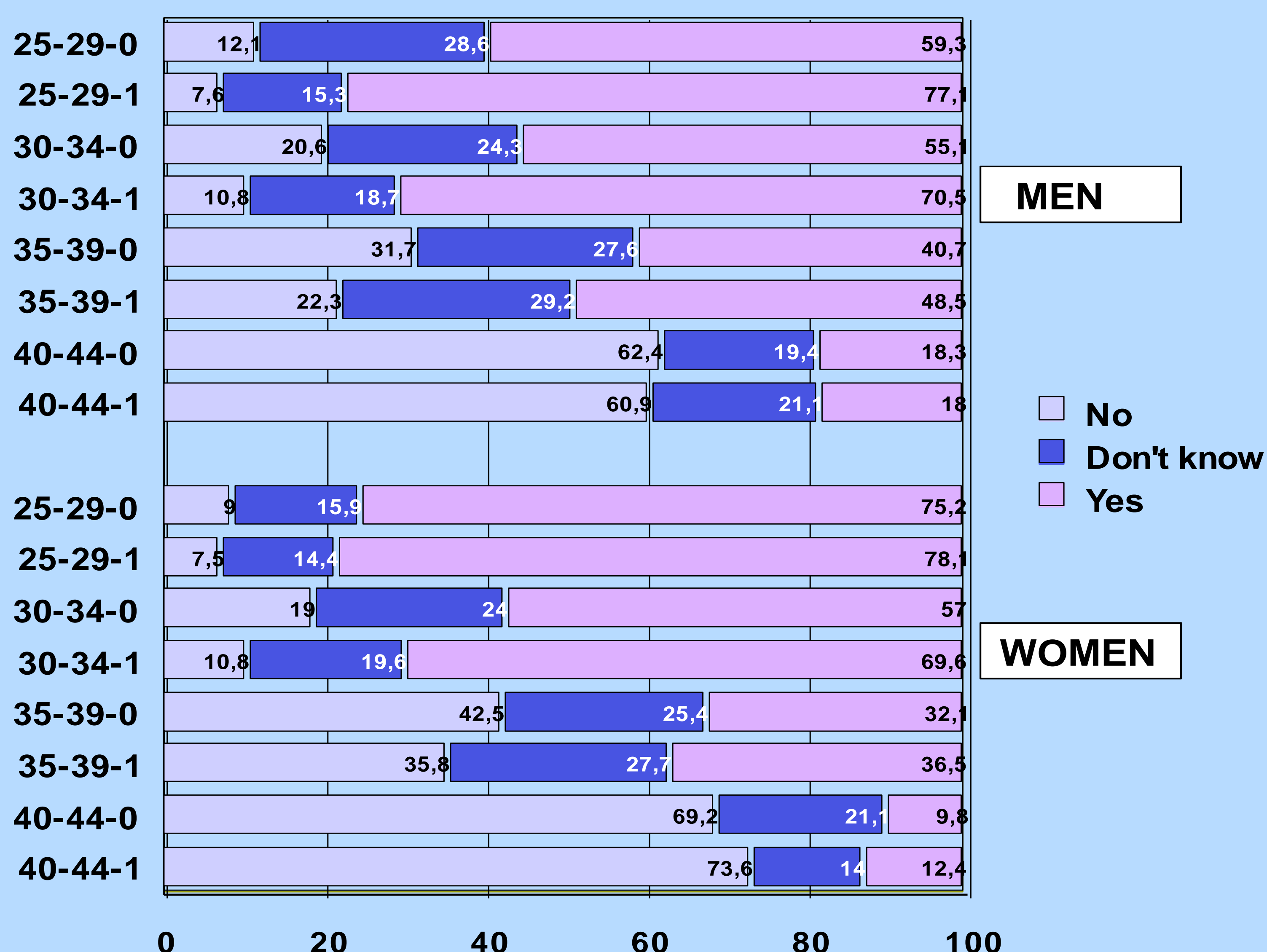
A national survey was conducted among childless or one-child men and women aged 25-44 years in Finland in 2008, inquiring about attitudes and expectations related to family, working life, childbearing and couple relationships.

Childbearing intentions were measured by asking respondents whether they planned to have children in the future (No/Don't know/Yes/ Currently pregnant). This study was restricted to respondents who were not / whose partner was not pregnant at the time of the survey (N=2461). We use logistic regression to investigate the association of sociodemographic factors, attitudes, psychological attributes and partnership characteristics with uncertainty towards childbearing. We focus on persons living in a union and compare uncertain respondents to those who do intend to have a child, but are postponing childbearing.

Summary of the results

Among low-parity respondents living in a union, cohabitation and the length of the union increased uncertainty about childbearing for both sexes. Women with low education, weak family values, a history of several unions and low perceived behavioural control were more likely to express uncertainty. Especially the role of perceived behavioural control in shaping intentions merits further research.

Figure 1. Childbearing intentions, 0/1-child Finnish men and women aged 25-44 years by age and parity, %



Results (1): Unfavourable socioeconomic conditions do not increase uncertainty (Table 1)

Less educated women are more likely to express uncertainty about childbearing. Income or employment did not have any marked impact on intention certainty for those living in a union.

Table 1. Impact of socioeconomic variables on the intention to have a(nother) child (1) vs. being unsure (0)

		MEN	WOMEN
Education	High	1.00	1.00
	Middle	.819	.712
	Low	.948	.527*
Employment	Employed	1.00	1.00
	Not working	.788	.819
Employment-partner	Employed	1.00	1.00
	Not working	1.392	.868
Household income	High	1.00	1.00
	Middle	.749	1.124
	Low	.664	1.151
	Missing	.431*	1.006

Note: Effect of covariates from a model including age and number of children, only respondents living in a union.

Results (2): Perceived lack of behavioural control decreases uncertainty also within unions (Table 2)

Work orientation, religiousness and number of own siblings were not related to uncertain intentions. Lack of behavioural control increased uncertainty while strong family orientation correlated with intention certainty among women.

Table 2. Impact of attitudes on the intention to have a(nother) child (1) vs. being unsure (0)

		MEN	WOMEN
Religion	Important	1.00	1.00
	Not important	.883	.785
No of siblings	0	1.00	1.00
	1+	.750	1.234
Family orientation	Not strong	1.00	1.00
	Strong	1.124	1.659*
Work orientation	High	1.00	1.00
	Middle	.627	1.142
	Low	.652	1.246
Ability to influence one's life	Good	1.00	1.00
	Poor	.821	.473***

Note: Effect of covariates from a model including age and number of children, only men/women living in a union.

Results (3): Partnership characteristics (Table 3)

Cohabitation as well as duration of the union increased uncertainty for both sexes. Previous unions are related to increased uncertainty among women, but not among men.

Table 3. Impact of partnership characteristics on the intention to have a(nother) child (1) vs. being unsure (0)

		MEN	WOMEN
Type of union	Marriage	1.00	1.00
	Cohabiting	.620+	.660+
Previous unions	No	1.00	1.00
	Yes	1.106	.635*
Duration of union	0-4 yrs	1.00	1.00
	5-9 yrs	.709	.833
	10+ yrs	.428*	.475*

Note: Effect of covariates from a model including age and number of children, only men/women living in a union.