

Chapter 7

Childlessness in Finland

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7.1 Introduction

“– *Well, life didn't turn out as expected.*”

Recently, I (the first author of this chapter) attended a school reunion where I caught up with former classmates, many of whom I had not seen for decades. When I spoke to one of the attendees, I was intrigued by her frank answer, quoted above, to my general question about how she was doing. Finns have preserved the touching habit of taking small talk seriously. So I asked her what she meant.

“– *For a start, I have no children.*”

Since my former classmates are now approaching 50, it was clear that the child-bearing years were over for the women in the room. Most of the people gathered had a couple of teenagers at home, while some had older children who had already moved out. Some of the men had paired up with younger women and had toddlers. As so often in such social situations, how the children are doing emerged as the easiest, safest discussion topic in the noisy room. Even if the children have problems, they can be shared anecdotally, or glossed over by a superficial answer.

The topic of childlessness is much more sensitive. Finns are liberal and secular in their attitudes towards family life. As early as in the 1980s, over 70 % of Finnish women surveyed said they did not believe that a woman has to have children in order to be fulfilled (Nikander 1992), and only 20 % said they thought that a person could not be completely happy unless he or she has children (Paajanen et al. 2007). Although there is no strong stigma associated with childlessness in Finland, it is still not easy to ask people why they are childless, in part because the reasons they might

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give are so varied. Did my acquaintance have a partner? She indicated that she had been in a stable relationship for a long period of time. Was her partner unwilling to have children? Or had they experienced medical problems? Or, like the “perpetual postponers” found across Europe, had they avoided the decision about whether to have a child until it was biologically too late for her to conceive (Berrington 2004)? Had she acknowledged long ago that she was never going to become a mother, or had she only recently recognized that she would be childless?

I did not find out, as we were soon interrupted. Still, it may be the brevity and vagueness of our conversation that best captures the essence of childlessness in contemporary Finland. Like most Finns, my former classmate indicated that she had expected to become a mother. Indeed, most of our peers had two or three—or, more rarely, only one—child. But for my former classmate and a substantial and growing minority of the Finnish population things had not “turned out as planned” when it came to childbearing. Currently, 25 % of men and 20 % of women aged 40–45 do not have a child of their own.

In this chapter we describe the general trends in childlessness among both women and men in Finland, focusing on the generations born after the Second World War. In particular, we are interested in investigating how the prevalence of lifetime childlessness among people of different educational levels has changed, and how marriages and cohabitations relate to childlessness. We also discuss the childbearing intentions of childless Finns, and the extent to which these intentions are reflected in their actual childbearing behaviour. The term childless is used for all adults who have no children of their own, whether through birth or adoption. We recognise that this definition excludes important family ties individuals may have to a child, e.g., through step-parenting or foster care.

7.2 Data and Methods

Two types of data are used: register data obtained from Statistics Finland, and nationally representative survey data collected by the Population Research Institute at Väestöliitto. The survey data were also linked to register data on subsequent births.

7.2.1 Register Data

Statistics Finland provides register data on births and family life indicators. Some indicators span more than a century, and many are available at the Statistics Finland website, www.stat.fi. Birth statistics are collected for children born to women resident in Finland; we refer to these children and their parents as “Finns”. The majority of residents of Finland are ethnically Finnish and Finnish nationals. When we cite Statistics Finland as the data source, the data cover the entire Finnish population.

We also use the FINNUNION dataset, an 11 % sample drawn from the population registers by Statistics Finland. The register database covers the entire population of Finland from 1970 to 2010, and links data from a longitudinal population register, including data on vital events with registers of employment and educational qualifications. From 1987 onwards, the register-based union histories cover not only marriages, but also cohabitations, which is widespread in Finland (Coleman 2014). FINNUNION contains data on around 471,000 individuals born in 1930–1990 and their marital and cohabiting partners. When we cite the FINNUNION dataset as the data source, it refers to this particular register dataset. We divide individuals into 5-year birth cohorts, and denote each cohort—unless otherwise specified—by the first year of the 5 years. Thus, for example, a reference to birth cohorts 1950 and 1965 would refer to the birth cohorts 1950–1954 and 1965–1969, respectively.

7.2.2 Survey Data

The Well-Being and Social Relationships Survey is a nationally representative Finnish survey that was conducted in 2008 by the Population Research Institute at Väestöliitto (the Finnish Family Federation). The questionnaires were mailed to 7000 Finnish residents aged 25–44 years who had no or only one child (Miettinen and Rotkirch 2008; Miettinen 2010). The response rate was 44 %. The questionnaire asked the respondents about various aspects of their personal and marital well-being, attitudes and expectations towards work, relationship quality, family and social relationships, and childbearing ideals and intentions.¹ Here we use only the answers provided by the childless respondents ($N = 1244$). For more details, see Miettinen (2010) and Miettinen et al. (2011).

In 2011, these survey data were combined with register data from the Population Register Centre of Finland for those respondents who gave their permission. The combined data enabled us to examine the effect of fertility intentions and other survey measures including relationship quality on actual births during the period 2008–2011. The number of respondents in the combined data is 1981, of whom 922 were childless at the time of the survey in 2008; for more information, see Lainiala (2011, 2012).

7.3 General Trends in Fertility and Childlessness: Finland as the Northern European Outlier

Compared to other European countries, Finland has relatively high overall fertility levels: completed cohort fertility has remained quite stable and even risen, from 1.86 for women born in 1950 to 1.90 for the 1970 birth cohort (Myrskylä et al.

¹The questionnaire is available in English at http://www.vaestoliitto.fi/in_english/population_research_institute/family_research/late_fertility/

2013). However, compared to elsewhere in Europe, the share of the population who are childless is very high in Finland (see Sobotka, Chap. 2, in this book). A recent study that compared the childlessness rates of 40–44-year-old men and women across 20 European countries found that men in Finland had the highest level of childlessness, while women in Finland had the third-highest level of childlessness, after Italy and Switzerland. Finland has also seen its childlessness levels increase more rapidly in recent decades than most other European countries (Miettinen et al. 2015).

Finland's fertility regime and childbearing patterns are similar in many respects to those of the other Nordic countries (Andersson et al. 2009). Thus, the cohort fertility rate in Finland is close to the rate in Denmark of around 1.90 (for women born in 1950–1970), and is somewhat lower than the rates in Norway and Sweden of slightly higher than two (Myrskylä et al. 2013). These Nordic welfare states share a number of historical and social policy characteristics, and are the global leaders in social and gender equality (Kautto 2001). However, when we look at the distribution of the number of children born to each woman, we can see that the polarization of fertility, or the reproductive skew, is pronounced in Finland (Fig. 7.1).

As Fig. 7.1 shows, around 30 % of Finnish women currently in their 40s have three or more children. Together, these high-parity women produce half of the children born. By contrast, throughout the twentieth century, 15–25 % of Finnish women had no children. This distinguishes Finland from Scandinavia, where the reproductive skew is milder, mothers with more than two children are more scarce (Eurostat 2015) and childlessness is also lower (Andersson et al. 2009).

Among the women who were born in the early twentieth century in Finland, the proportion who were childless was as high as 25 % (Fig. 7.1). This share then declined to around 15 % among women born in the mid-twentieth century, and has since risen to around 20 % for the last cohort of women who have reached the end of their childbearing years. By comparison, among the women born in 1935–1949 in Norway, the share who were childless at age 40 was less than 10 %, and the corresponding figure for Sweden was 12 % (Andersson et al. 2009: 323).

Across the cohorts, lifetime childlessness in Finland has clearly been more prevalent among men than among women. Figure 7.2 shows the proportions of both women and men born between 1930 and 1975 who were childless at ages 40–44.

Although men can have children at later ages, very few of them do, as most Finnish men have a partner who is around the same age. Around 80 % Finnish couples have an age difference of 5 years or less, and less than 0.5 % have an age difference of 20 years or more (Nikander 2010). Consequently, men of the 1940–1950 birth cohort reached a 95 % level of achieved cohort fertility by ages 41–42 (Nisén, Martikainen et al. 2014: 127). It is of course possible for a man to have fathered a child even though his paternity is not recognised by the authorities. Currently, only 1.9 % of all children born have no registered father (THL 2015). Since not all of these cases involve men who are otherwise childless, the current proportion of men who have sired children but are not recognised as the father of any of those children—and are thus considered childless—can be estimated at no more than 1 %.

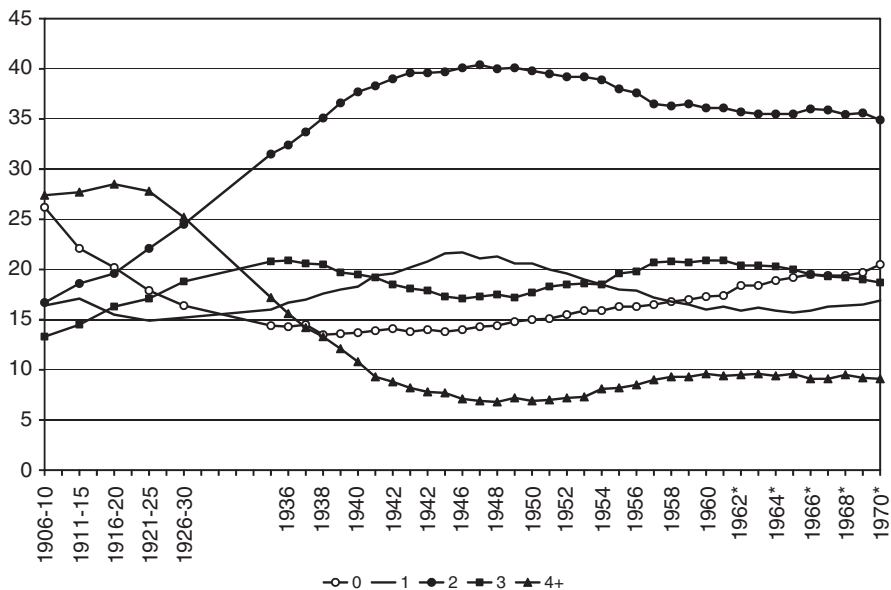


Fig. 7.1 Proportions of women by numbers of children, in per cent, female cohorts born in 1906–1970 (women at age 45/50). Note: *Asterisk* indicates cohorts who are still of reproductive age (Source: Statistics Finland and Population Research Institute, Väestöliitto (own calculations based on register data))

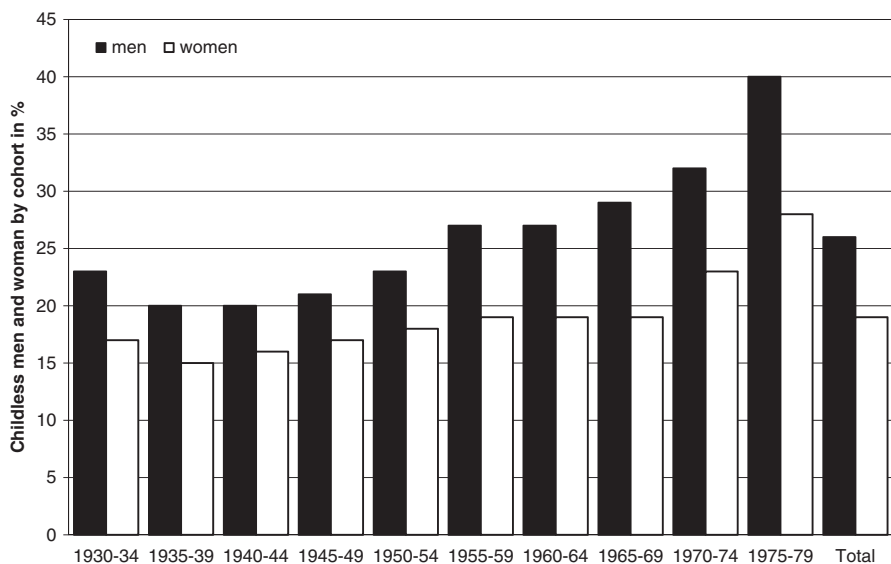


Fig. 7.2 Proportions of childless men and women in Finland at ages 40–44, in per cent, cohorts born in 1930–1975. Note: The last two cohorts have not reached the end of their childbearing years (Source: Statistics Finland, FINNUNION register dataset, and Population Research Institute, Väestöliitto (own calculations))

The historical data suggest that in preindustrial Finland childlessness was common among both men and women. Among agrarian Finns, who were largely neolocal, couples were not supposed to marry and have children until they were sufficiently independent to live and manage on their own (Therborn 2004). Consequently, the ages at marriage and first birth were relatively high, at around 25–26 years for women and a couple of years higher for men (see Lahdenperä et al. 2004 for the eighteenth century, Liu et al. 2012 for the nineteenth century). Data from four Finnish parishes in 1760–1849 indicate that among individuals who reached adulthood, lifetime childlessness was 34 % among men and 26 % among women. Among ever married adults, childlessness was 15.5 % among men and 14 % among women (Courtiol et al. 2012; Pettay, personal communication).

In European societies of the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century it was not unusual for 20–25 % of women to be childless. However, unlike in most of the rest of Europe, in Finland childlessness rates remained high throughout the twentieth century (Rowland 2007). While in most countries childlessness rates fell among the cohorts born in 1940–1950, in Finland the decrease was less marked. The lack of a “low dip” in childlessness levels in the mid-twentieth century can be attributed in part to the huge losses the country experienced during the Second World War and the ensuing relocation of a large share of the population. Finland lost 82,000 men in battle, a figure that is 13 times larger than the corresponding figures in the other Nordic countries. Moreover, 410,000 Finnish Karelians, or 12 % of the population, had to be relocated from Karelia to other parts of the country after 1940. In the 1960s, emigration especially to Sweden meant the loss of over half a million Finns from the population.

When the first cohorts studied were born (1940–1950), Finland was a relatively poor country that had only recently been industrialised, and was suffering from the effects of the Second World War. In the decades that followed, living standards improved, and the country made a rapid transition to being a post-industrial and wealthy welfare state. Traditionally, the labour force participation rates of Finnish women, including of mothers with children, have been high, and both women and men tend to work full-time (see, e.g., Haataja and Nyberg 2006).

7.4 Increase in Childlessness in Unions

While family formation and reproduction patterns have changed considerably in Finland in recent decades, being in a partnership continues to be an important prerequisite for childbearing (Spéder and Kapitány 2009; Miettinen et al. 2015). Like in many other developed countries, in Finland men are more likely than women to remain outside a marital or cohabiting union throughout their life. For both men and women, having socio-economic resources—such as high educational attainment, steady employment, and a reliable source of income—promotes union formation (Jalovaara 2012).

The age at first union formation in Finland appears to have changed little in recent decades. Among the cohorts who were born in the 1970s, half of the women were cohabiting or married by age 22, and almost half of the men were in a union by age 25. By the age of 33, 90 % of women and 83 % of men had formed a union (Jalovaara 2012: 75).

These relatively young ages at union formation are supported by the welfare state, which provides housing benefits and income support, and by the prevailing cultural ethos, which favours early independence from the family home. By contrast, the mean age at entering parenthood increased in recent decades: women who were born in the 1960s had their first child 2–3 years later than those who were born in the 1950s, and the mean age at first birth is now around 28.6 years (Official Statistics of Finland 2014). Thus, it appears that today Finns live in unions for longer periods of time before having a child. Does this mean that the association between having a partner and having a child has weakened?

Childlessness is indeed less tied to formal marriage today than it was in the past. Figure 7.3 shows how marital status (i.e., being never married, married, divorced, or separated) is related to being childless in different birth cohorts. We can see that among individuals who are in their early forties, childlessness is much more common among those who never married than among those who married, but that among men and women who never married the shares who were childless have

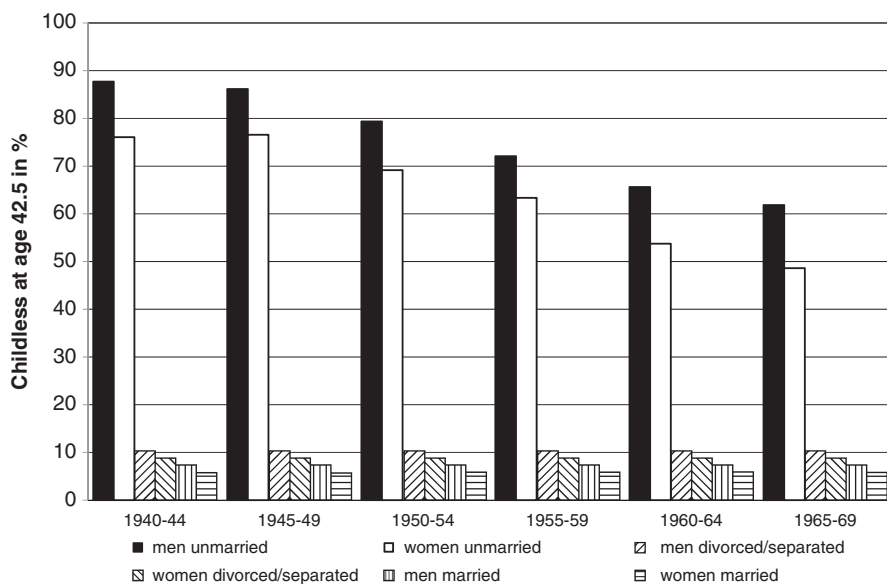


Fig. 7.3 Proportion of childless men and women in Finland at age 42.5 by marital status and birth cohort, in per cent. Note: Widowed persons (0.2 % among 42.5-year-old-men, 1.0 % among 42.5-year-old women) are included in the “married” category. Marital status as measured at age 42.5. Unmarried = person has never married (by age 42.5) (Source: Statistics Finland, FINNUNION register dataset, and Population Research Institute, Väestöliitto (own calculations))

steadily declined across birth cohorts: 88 % of never married men and 76 % of never married women born in 1940–1944 were childless in their early forties, compared to 66 % of men and 54 % of women born 20 years later, in 1960–1964.

The decreasing levels of childlessness among never married individuals across cohorts is related to the popularity of cohabitation in Finland. Nowadays the first union is usually cohabitation, and the first birth is typically to cohabiting parents. If cohabiting couples do not break up, they usually marry at some point in their life span. However, the wedding may be postponed considerably. Most couples with one child go on to have a second child, and they often get married at that stage, if they have not done so earlier (Miettinen and Rotkirch 2008). Thus, unlike in more traditional countries where cohabitation is less common, in Finland parenthood leads to marriage, rather than the other way around.

Being married is known to promote childbearing, especially compared to being single, but also compared to cohabiting (Coleman 1996). Also in Finland, married individuals have stronger intentions to become parents than cohabiting couples (Miettinen and Rotkirch 2008). However, even among married individuals childlessness has increased, from around 6 % to 8 % among men and from 5 % to 7 % among women (Fig. 7.3). This increase of around 2 % among married individuals accounts for less than 1.5 % of the overall rise in childlessness. Changes in the proportions of childless individuals among those who were married but later divorced or separated across birth cohorts have been even more modest, especially among women, for whom no time trend can be observed.

7.5 Childlessness Increases Among the Less Educated

In Finland as in many other countries, the relationship between socio-economic status and number of children is positive among men, largely because childlessness is more common among less educated men (Barthold et al. 2012). Figure 7.4 shows the proportions of men and women who are childless by level of education across birth cohorts. Among Finnish men, the proportion who are childless has clearly increased in all educational groups, while the educational gradient has persisted over cohorts (Fig. 7.4a).

Among Finnish women, the situation differs compared to men (Fig. 7.4b). In the oldest cohorts studied here, born during or immediately after World War II, the proportions of childless individuals are highest among women with a high level of education. Beginning with the female cohorts born in 1950, however, childlessness is highest among the least educated. In a wider context, this pattern is unusual: highly educated women are often the most likely to remain childless (see the chapters on the US and the UK in this book). However, in the Nordic countries motherhood has become increasingly common among highly educated women. Thus, the correlation between female educational levels and childbearing has become mixed or even positive in these countries (Kravdal and Rindfuss 2008; Persson 2010), including in Finland.

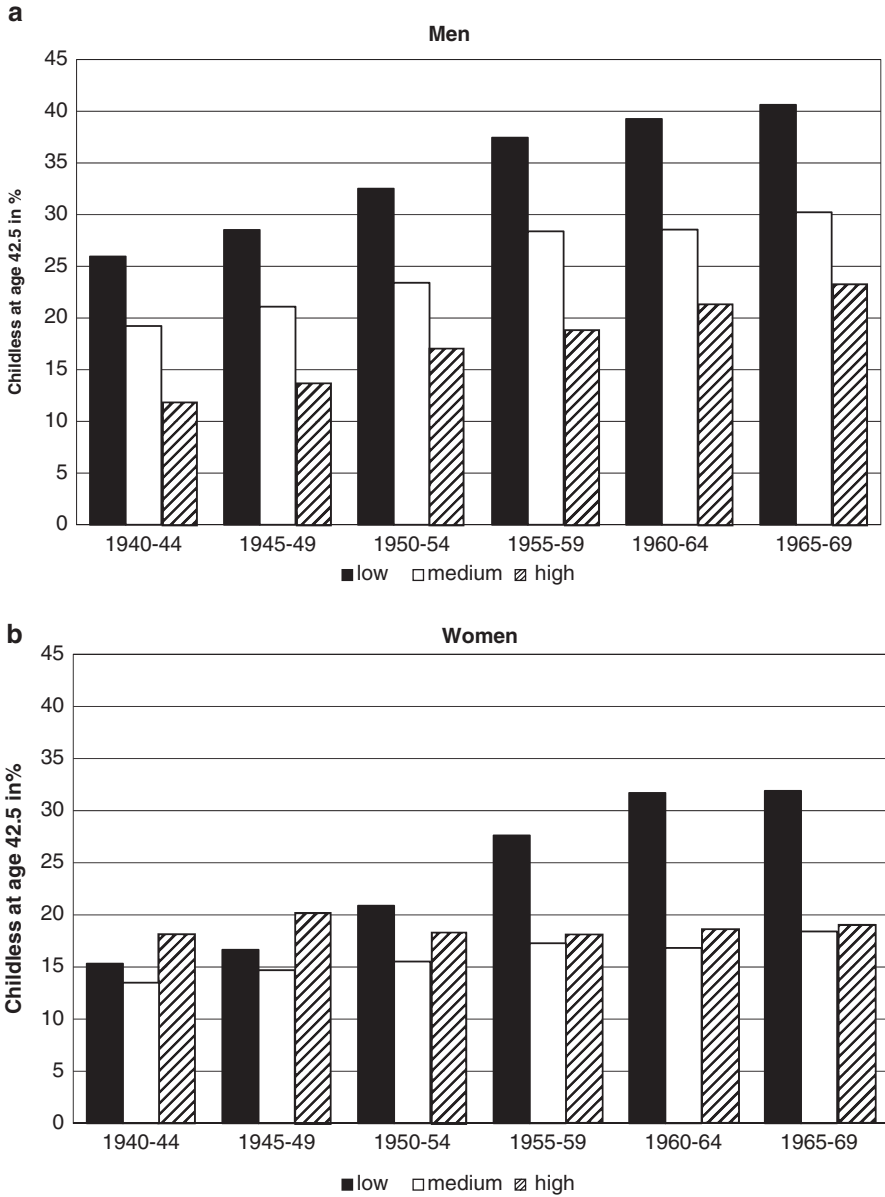


Fig. 7.4 (a and b) Proportion of Finns aged 42.5 who are childless by educational level, men (a) and women (b), in per cent. Note: For individuals born after 1967, at age 40–41. Education level: *Low* ISCED 1–2, *Medium* ISCED 3–4, *High* ISCED 5–6 (Source: FINNUNION register dataset, Population Research Institute, Väestöliitto (own calculations))

Figure 7.4b illustrates how women with a high level of education are somewhat more likely to be childless at age 42 than are women with a middle level of education in all birth cohorts. Childlessness slightly decreases among women with a high level of education, from 20 % in the 1945–1949 birth cohort, to around 18–19 % in the younger cohorts. By contrast, childlessness is most common among women with the least education during the last decades. Being childless has also increased twofold in this group during the period studied, from around 15 % to over 30 %. Also among women with mid-level education, childlessness has increased, but more moderately, from 13 to 18 %.

A comparison of childlessness levels across the entire population over the past decade shows a similar pattern to our analysis above: between 2004 and 2012, childlessness rates have increased the most among the least educated men and women (Fig. 7.5a and b).

When interpreting these results, one should keep in mind that the average level of education in Finland has increased: 26 % of men and 21 % women born in 1943–1972 and 18 % of men and 10 % of women born in 1973–1982 are in the lowest educational group (MED 2010).

It is also important to note that despite statistical associations between educational levels and childlessness, education is probably rarely the direct “cause” for childbearing behaviour. A study of childlessness among Finnish twins born in the 1950s found that the factors linking education to both male and female childlessness were shared by twins, and that these factors were genetic rather than environmental. For instance, cognitive abilities, personality traits or attitudes to parenthood may influence both the educational pathways and childbearing behaviour of individuals. The study found no evidence for a direct causal pathway linking childlessness in this cohort to lower education among men and higher education among women (Nisén et al. 2013).

7.6 Associations of Having a Spouse, Education and Childlessness

Is the increase in childlessness among less educated men and women associated with the lack of a partner? Above, we showed that being married remains linked to the probability of becoming a parent (Fig. 7.3). We further investigated how having ever had a spouse was associated with remaining childless in different educational groups. Having a spouse is defined as having lived in cohabitation or marriage at least once.

Never having had a spouse was clearly more frequent among men and women with little education compared to other educational groups (Table 7.1). Among those with least education, 24 % of men and 17 % of women had had no spouse. The more educated the men were, the more often they had had at least one spouse, so that only 7 % of highly educated men had not had any spouse. Among women, by

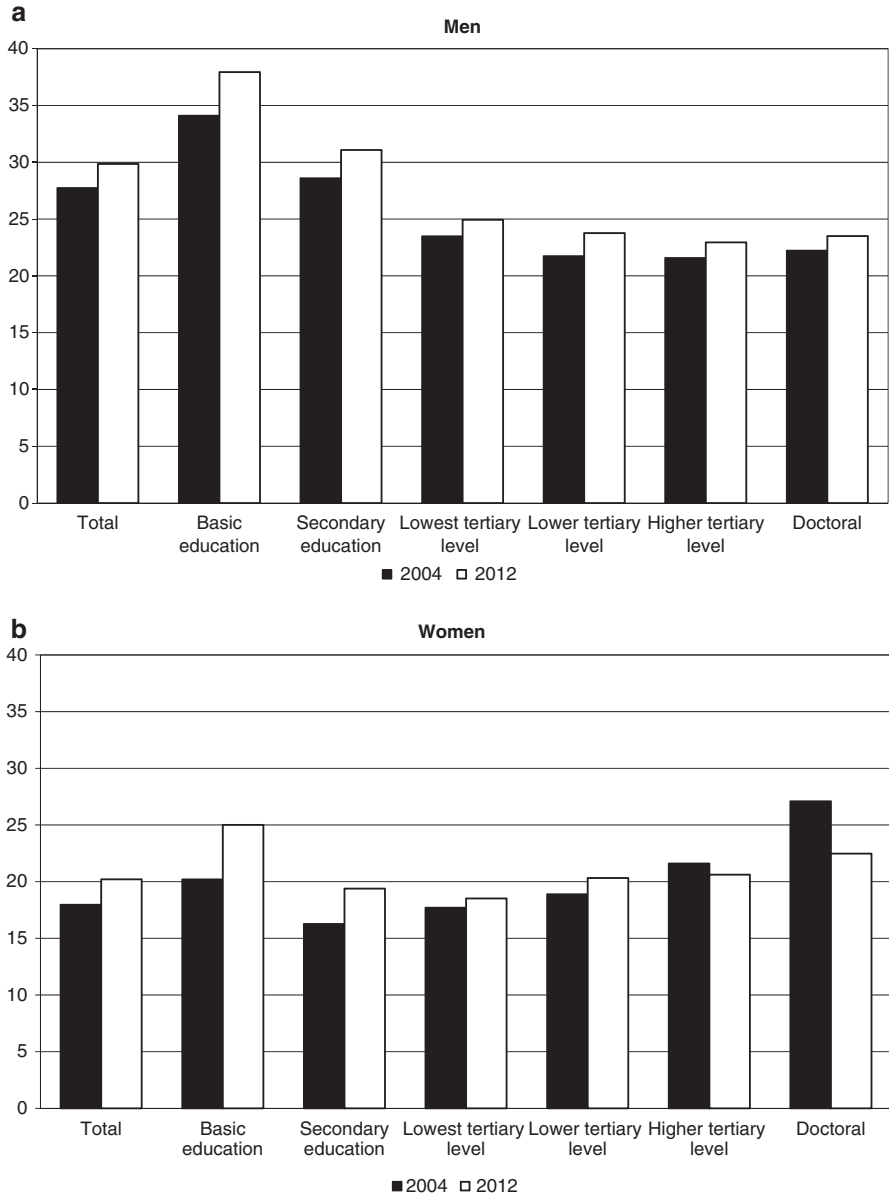


Fig. 7.5 (a and b) Proportion of childless people at ages 40–44 in 2004 and 2012 by educational level, men (a) and women (b), in per cent, entire Finnish population (Source: Statistics Finland and Population Research Institute, Väestöliitto (own calculations based on register data))

Table 7.1 Childlessness by having ever had a spouse (through marriage or cohabitation), Finnish men ($N = 95,331$) and women ($N = 91,528$) born 1945–1964, column per cent

		Having had no spouse	Childlessness among individuals with no spouse	Childlessness among individuals with at least one spouse	Proportion of childless individuals with no spouse of all childless individuals
Men	Low	24.1	92.1	17.0	63.3
	Middle	12.6	93.3	14.6	47.8
	High	6.5	94.8	11.3	37.8
	All men	14.8	92.8	14.3	53.0
Women	Low	17.4	84.1	12.2	59.2
	Middle	7.0	79.1	9.9	37.6
	High	9.5	86.4	12.2	42.6
	All women	10.8	83.6	11.3	47.3

Source: FINNUNION register dataset, Population Research Institute, Väestöliitto (own calculations)

Note: Educational level: Low = ISCED 1–2; Medium = ISCED 3–4; High = ISCED 5–6

contrast, those with highest education had somewhat more often not had any spouse than those with mid-level education.

Lifetime childlessness is strongly linked to not having had any spouse. Among men with no spouse ever, over 90 % were childless in all educational groups. Among men who had had a spouse, proportions of childless individuals ranged from 11 to 17 % in different educational groups and were most common among those with least education. Among women with no spouse, proportions of childlessness varied between 79 % among those with mid-level education to around 85 % among those with either low or high education. Of women who had ever cohabited or been married, those with mid-level education had the lowest proportions of childless individuals while women with either low or high education had similar levels of childlessness. Table 7.1 further shows that the concentration of childlessness among individuals with no spouse, compared to the overall childlessness in a particular educational group, also varied. Among men and women with middle or high education, between 40 and 50 % of childlessness was found among individuals with no spouse. Among men and women with low education, however, around 60 % of childless individuals had had no spouse.

We also entered these same variables into a regression (not shown in table; controlling for the effect of birth cohort). When taking into the account the effect of having had any spouse, differences in male childlessness by educational groups diminished, but remained highly statistically significant. Also among women, the educational differences in childlessness in women remained after controlling for having had any spouse, albeit less accentuated and only marginally statistically significant for the difference between women with low and high education. In other

words, the lack of spouse explains much but not all of differences in childlessness between educational groups. Having ever had a spouse accounts for most of the differences between women with high and low education.

Thus Finnish men with a low level of education were most likely never to have had a spouse, and also to be childless if they had had at least one spouse. Women with low education were also most likely never to have had a spouse, but as likely as those with a high level of education to have a child with or without a spouse. If having ever had a spouse would not affect childbearing, women with a low and women with a high level of education would be about as likely ever to become mothers. In this respect, it is Finnish women with a mid-level education who appear to be unusual, since they have lower levels of childlessness whether they had ever married or cohabited or not.

7.7 Regional and Occupational Effects

Region of residence and occupational status also affect the likelihood that an individual will enter a union or start a family. Finland has a small population, and the density of the population is low: there are around 5.5 million Finnish citizens and only 18 inhabitants per square kilometre. Thus, the population density in Finland is much lower than in Sweden and Denmark, although still higher than in Norway and Iceland. As a consequence of urbanisation and the high proportion of women who are educated, the sex ratios at age 20 in Finnish municipalities have become more skewed over the last three decades. Currently, half of the 20–29-year-olds live in a sub-region with a male surplus in that age range; with 10 out of 18 sub-regions having a sex ratio above 1.1 (Lainiala and Miettinen 2013).

Sex ratios are associated with childlessness. Higher sex ratios or a male surplus in a certain age group appears to accentuate the reproductive skew, especially among Finnish men. In Finnish municipalities where the proportion of young males is higher than the proportion of young females, a larger share of women are likely to partner earlier, and go on to have children earlier, than in areas with less skewed sex ratios. This may raise overall fertility levels in those municipalities. However, a larger share of men remain unmarried in these municipalities, contributing to increased male childlessness (Lainiala and Rotkirch 2015).

Childlessness has also been shown to be more common among some occupational groups. In a study of Finnish men and women born between 1940 and 1950 that used register data, Nisén, Myrskylä et al. (2014) investigated the effects of family background on fertility, including on childlessness. They found that women who were from families headed by an administrative or professional worker were more likely to have remained childless than women who were from a family headed by a manual worker or farmer. After various family background variables, such as the number of siblings and the family type, were taken into account, having a manual labour family background was still shown to be associated with female childlessness (ibid.).

7.8 Low Voluntary Childlessness

Is the growth in childlessness due to a preference for a childfree lifestyle? It is widely assumed that voluntary childlessness, or the decision to have a childfree lifestyle, is the main explanation for the increase in childlessness in contemporary western societies. While there is some evidence that young adults feel more free to express less traditional views on having children today than in the past, recent studies have shown that voluntary childlessness is still relatively rare in most countries. This seems to be the case in Finland, as well (Miettinen and Paajanen 2005).

We here define voluntary childlessness as a personal ideal and intention to have no children (Miettinen 2010). We also distinguish between childless individuals who say they intend to have children in the future, and those who say they do not expect to have children, whether voluntarily or not.

The results of several national and international surveys indicate that most Finns want to have children, and seldom choose to be childless. The average ideal and intended numbers of children cited by respondents in Finland have been around 2.5 since the 1970s (Miettinen and Rotkirch 2008). In the Eurobarometer 2011, the average ideal number of children cited was 2.5 among Finnish women and 2.1 among Finnish men (Testa 2011). The average intended number of children was, at 2.3 among women and 2.1 among men, somewhat lower than the average ideal number, but was still clearly higher than the actual fertility rate. In the same survey, 0 % of the women aged 25–54 said their ideal number of children was to have none, while 6 % of the 15–24-year-old women and 2 % of the women above age 55 said they did not wish to have children. Among men, childlessness as an ideal declined with age: from 10 % among 15–24-year-olds, to 6 % among 25–34-year-olds, to 5 % among 50–54-year-olds, and, finally, to 2 % among those aged 55 and above. Compared to the childbearing ideals expressed in other Nordic countries, Finnish fertility ideals Finland tend to be similar or somewhat higher (Testa 2011).

The Well-Being and Social Relationships Survey conducted by Väestöliitto in 2008 had a larger sample of childless individuals than the Eurobarometer. In this survey, the fertility intentions among the childless respondents aged 25–44 were as follows: among men, 4 % had a pregnant partner, 9 % had a partner who was trying to get pregnant, 38 % wanted to have children at some point, 22 % were unsure, and 27 % did not intend to have a child. Among women, 3 % were pregnant, 15 % were trying to become pregnant, 36 % wanted to have a child at some point, and 25 % did not plan to have children at all (Lainiala 2012).

Among those who did not intend to have children, the personal ideal number of children was often larger than one, indicating that voluntary childlessness was not very common (Fig. 7.6). Among the 25–29-year-old respondents who were childless, 5 % of the women and 3 % of the men stated that they did not intend to have any children, and preferred to have a life without children. Among the 35–44-year-old respondents, 14 % of the women and 10 % of the men were classified as voluntarily childless using the same criteria (Miettinen 2010).

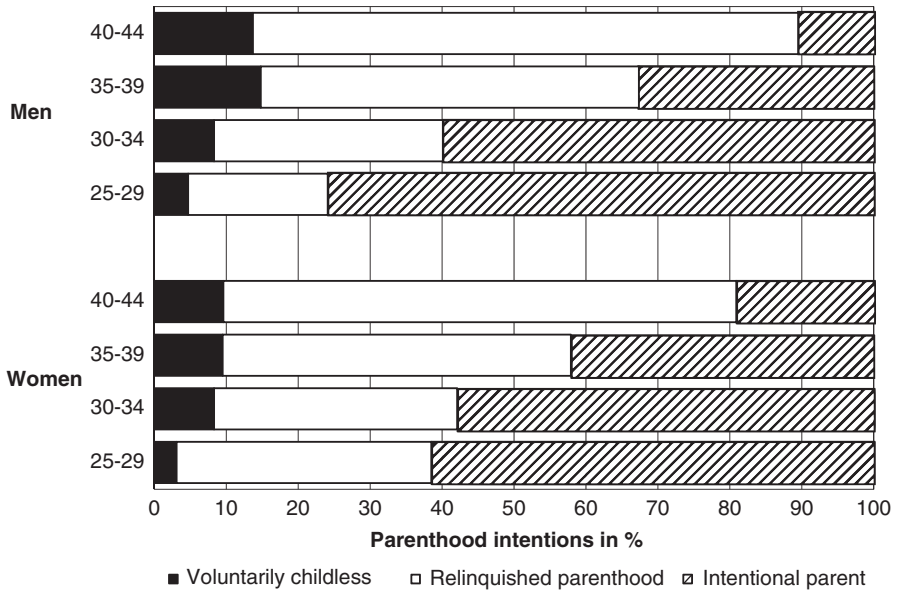


Fig. 7.6 Parenthood intentions among childless 25–44-year-old men and women in Finland in 2008, in per cent, $N = 1244$. Note: Reprinted from Miettinen (2010) (Source: Finnish Well-Being and Social Relationships Survey 2008, Väestöliitto)

If we take into account the proportion of all 40–44-year-olds who are childless, we can estimate that less than 3 % of Finnish men and women who have reached or are close to reaching the end of their reproductive age span can be said to be voluntarily childless.

7.9 Delays in Planned Childbearing

While fertility intentions feed into actual behaviour, there is a gap between ideals and intentions, on the one hand, and actual childbearing, on the other hand. In Finland, this gap is among the highest in Europe, mostly due to the proportions of childless people who would have wished for around two children (Goldstein et al. 2003). We combined data from the Well-Being and Social Relationships Survey with register data on births to find out whether the fertility intentions expressed by the childless respondents had been realised during the 3 years following the survey (Lainiala 2011, 2012). The results showed that of the 25–44-year-old men and women who had not yet had a child in 2008, 35 % had become a parent by 2011. Of the respondents who had said they intended to have a child within 2 years, 44 % had realised their plans. Thus, the majority of childless Finns who had wanted to have a child in the near future had not been able to do so.

The probability of becoming a parent was, unsurprisingly, positively related to fertility intentions. Among those who already tried to achieve pregnancy at the time of the survey, around two thirds had succeeded in having a child during the next years. Among those who were uncertain about having a child, however, less than 10 % had become a parent during the follow-up period. Finally, among those who said they did not want to have a child, only very few had nevertheless become a parent; this was the case among 0 % of men and 2 % of women (Lainiala 2012: 26). Why would this last group have changed its mind? Lainiala (2012) found that having a spouse who wanted a child in some cases changed a woman's (but no man's) fertility plans, so that they became parents although they had earlier declared they did not intend to do so.

Lainiala (2011) also investigated how relationship satisfaction at the time of the survey related to childbearing intentions, and to actually having a first child. For a male respondent, relationship satisfaction was a stronger predictor of actual fatherhood than his own fertility intentions. For a female respondent, relationship satisfaction was not as important for fertility, as a high degree of satisfaction with the spouse was related to both increased and decreased actual childbearing.

Other factors that negatively influenced the transition to a first child were age, being in education or unemployed, and for men, lack of a permanent job (Lainiala 2012).

7.10 Infertility

Of the Finnish men and women studied who remained childless in the Relationship and Wellbeing Survey, the share who had no children because they were suffering from primary infertility was around 10 % (Miettinen and Rotkirch 2008). This would represent around 5 % of the whole adult population. Notkola (1995), using retrospective data on female cohorts born in 1938–1965, found that 3 % of women remained childless due to primary infertility. However, the proportion of couples who suffer from infertility may have increased in recent years due to both the postponement of family formation and the spread of health conditions that can lead to infertility, such as obesity. On the other hand, assisted reproduction technologies have become increasingly sophisticated and available, countering the rise in childlessness due to primary infertility (Miettinen 2011). As the efficacy of treatments has improved, more couples will be able have the child they want with the help of technology. In 2013, 13,500 IVF-treatment cycles were started in Finland. From these treatments, 2473 live children were born, representing 4.4 % of live births in Finland in that year (National Institute for Health and Welfare 2015).

7.11 Conclusions: Many Shades of Childlessness

For decades, Finland has had some of the highest rates of childlessness in Europe among both men and women. An unusual feature of childlessness in Finland is that it is particularly prevalent among both men and women from the least educated groups of society. This pattern has become even more pronounced in recent decades, as we have shown here. Part of the explanation is that men and women in the least educated group are also less likely to have had any spouse.

Like the other Nordic countries, Finland has generous family policies and high levels of gender equality—characteristics that are often associated with comparatively high fertility levels (Rønsen and Skrede 2010, see also Section 2.5). The availability of childcare has also been shown to increase fertility at all parities (Rindfuss et al. 2010). It has also been suggested that during the severe economic recession in the early 1990s in Finland, family policies that provided child homecare allowances helped to sustain fertility levels (Vikat 2004). Whereas in the UK and the US childlessness rates are low among less educated women because unwanted pregnancies are common, the Nordic welfare state is highly successful at preventing unwanted pregnancies. Nevertheless, both overall and involuntary forms of childlessness have increased in Finland, even as cohort fertility has been rising and family benefits have become increasingly broad and generous.

There are some clear-cut reasons for not becoming a parent: the lack of partner, not wanting to have a child, or being unable to conceive. Of these reasons, not having a partner remains the strongest single reason for not having children, in Finland and elsewhere. When we compare European countries, we can see that the proportion of the population who have ever married remains positively correlated with lower levels of childlessness, and the results for Finland are in line with this broader picture (Miettinen et al. 2015). It is also increasingly more common for an individual to be childless even though he or she has a partner.

Most childless Finns approaching the end of their reproductive lives are not childless by choice or through infertility. Around 4–5 % of the whole population say they do not want to have children. At the other “extreme” of the childlessness spectrum, infertility affects about the same proportion of the population. Thus, for most Finns who are not parents, childlessness is not attributable to a single, clear-cut reason, but rather appears to result from various choices about love, work, and contraceptive use made at different stages of life.

Finland’s history of having higher levels of childlessness than the other Nordic countries may be attributable to both geographical and historical factors. Although comparative data are lacking, it is likely that Finland had more skewed national and local sex ratios because of the country’s losses in the Second World War, mass emigration, and the low density of the population. These demographic challenges combine with the diverging educational trajectories of young men and women. Compared to the other Nordic countries, Finland has had a larger proportion of women with tertiary education, and this gap has widened over time.

The policies that successfully promote family formation may not be identical to those that would be most effective in preventing childlessness. Most worrying is the finding that childlessness—and consequently, proportions of persons without any close relatives in the old age—is increasing among the least educated men and women, who may be disadvantaged in terms of their access to health services, infertility treatments, and counselling.

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