

Title: Changing Partnership Dynamics and Childlessness in Finland

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Our research aims to gain insight into how social and gender inequalities and partnership dynamics impact changing fertility dynamics in modern welfare states, such as Finland and the other Nordic countries. The Nordic countries are experiencing an unexpectedly rapid fertility decline. In Finland, for example, the Total Fertility Rate (TFR) has declined by 25% in the last 8 years much of which is due to an increase in childlessness. Recent findings suggest that these trends are strongly tied to educational disparities (Jalovaara et al. 2018) and are likely to continue. We seek to understand the causes of this accelerating decline in Nordic fertility, and associated rise in childlessness, by addressing key social and gender inequities that affect partnership dynamics and are frequently neglected in fertility research. We suspect that increased childlessness among unpartnered individuals with lower education levels, and hence reduced opportunities for employment, will reflect socioeconomic disparities in opportunities to form families, and that these changes in partnership formation and stability will affect men and women similarly. Overall we expect to find that the traditional mechanisms by which socioeconomically advantaged women face obstacles to family formation have largely been consigned to history in Nordic countries, and that new disparities related to changing partnership dynamics have emerged. We discuss how changing opportunities of men and women, in addition to gender specific mate preferences, might affect these results and suggest the implications that changing partnership dynamics have for other countries that are beginning to experience many of these same transformations.

Previous research

Overall there is surprising little life course research on how contemporary partnership dynamics are linked to childlessness. One Dutch study (Keizer et al. 2008), however, showed that never having had a partner and having had more than one partnership both strongly predict childlessness, especially among men. Similarly, Hart (2019) showed that in Norway, childlessness is linked to late in life unions, unions of short duration and having entered multiple unions. Our previous study (Jalovaara and Fasang 2017) showed that lifetime childlessness in Finland is strongly linked to contemporary union dynamics: neverpartnering and cohabitation instability. In Finnish birth cohorts 1969–70, around 45 % of those who were childless at age 42 had (almost) never partnered (ibid.).

There is also some research on educational differentials in contemporary union dynamics. For instance, our recent study (Jalovaara & Fasang 2015) showed that in Finland neverpartnering is more common among less educated individuals and this was true for both men and women. This replicates the findings of many other studies which have shown that marriage and union stability are higher among highly educated men and women.

The aim of this study

This paper asks: how have partnership dynamics and their link to entry into parenthood changed among men and women with different levels of education. This study aims to gain insight into the socioeconomic inequalities and their changing links to gender that lie behind the rapid increase in childlessness in a contemporary Nordic welfare society. Specifically, we analyse how partnership formation patterns, partnership stability and their links to entry into parenthood have changed across cohorts of Finnish men and women born ca. 1969–1985 distinguished by their level of education. This analysis will inform the extent to which lowered rates of entry into parenthood reflect an increase in childless cohabitation, partnership instability, and lowered rates of entry into coresidential partnerships, as well as how these developments are shaped by education and gender.

The primary concern of these analyses is childlessness, or alternatively entry into parenthood. However, these results have broader implications for the fertility decline in general, because the decline in first births is the main contributor to the recent fertility decline.

Data

We use high-quality register data prepared by Statistics Finland called “Population and inequality: Finland in the Nordic region (PIF)” which links data from a longitudinal population register with various registers of employment, educational qualifications, vital events, and other sources. These data cover the entire Finnish population from 1970 onwards (N = ca. 7.1 million) and include full histories of childbearing, marriage and cohabitation and other vital events including educational histories, annual information on household members, economic activities, incomes (e.g. social security benefits), occupations, municipality of residence, housing, and other demographic data on all individuals. Data on family members (partners, children, parents, siblings) can be linked through anonymised codes. The data on the timing of vital events and educational degrees are recorded with the precision of 1 month, while much of the other data (e.g. employment, earnings and other sources of income, housing, and occupation) are recorded annually from 1987 onwards. For earlier years, there are census data (1950 sample, and 1970, 1975, 1980, 1985 censuses). A unique feature of Finnish registers of particular value for this project is that data on registered domiciles are available for a depth of up to three decades (1987–), which allows us to infer histories of non-marital cohabitation (for the rules of inference, see Jalovaara & Kulu 2018).

Methods

We use sequence and cluster methods in combination with mixed model regression analyses and event history methods.

Preliminary and expected findings

We expect to show that

- 1) the increase in childlessness reflects changing partnership dynamics: cohabitation instability and (almost) neverpartnering. By (almost) neverpartnered (hereafter referred to simply as ‘neverpartnered’), we are referring to persons who during their early adulthood have not entered a coresidential partnership or have only briefly cohabited, meaning that they have lived alone for most of their adult life.
- 2) the increase in childlessness especially among the poorly educated reflects differences in partnership dynamics among both lower and higher educated individuals.
- 3) partnership dynamics are an important link between educational level and both childlessness and parity progression. Our preliminary analyses are consistent with the findings of Trimarchi and Van Bavel (2017) and show that the strong negative association between low education and ultimate childlessness among Finnish men is strongly linked to partnership life course. Sequence and cluster analysis has shown that within partnership differences in childlessness by educational level are small, and that in stable partnerships (i.e. married or cohabiting) life courses, non-existent (Fig 1). Among women, however, the importance of cohabitation instability for childlessness seems to vary by education (Fig 2). Possible concerns in these initial analyses are endogeneity in partnership and childbearing dynamics, and over controlling for superfluous variables. We are working to resolve these issues.

We expect to find *double polarisation* across family trajectories whereby the family-life courses of those with less education are polarised into childlessness and neverpartnering on the one hand, and early, non-union childbearing, single, non-residential parenthood, and childbearing across several partnerships on the other. In contrast, the family life courses of highly educated men and women will be more uniform and characterised by less fragmentary partnership trajectories, enabling continued childbearing with a single partner.

Of particular interest is the large group of neverpartnered individuals, which is linked to socioeconomic disadvantage, particularly among men. Such groups often go unnoticed in research on family inequality, as researchers either focus only on women and children, or compare family types, which excludes those who do not have a family. Our findings are consistent with research showing health benefits, reduced mortality, and greater overall well-being of being partnered and that these advantages are greater for men (Joutsenniemi 2007).

Next, we plan to continue this research by describing how educational careers shape partnership and parenthood life courses among men and women in Finland. Here we expect to again find this double polarisation and plan to explore how differential life courses such as childhood background, employment, earnings, partnership trajectories and region of residence might explain the educational disparities in ultimate childlessness among men and women in Finland.

The research is linked to my Academy Project ‘Falling fertility and the inequalities involved’ (<http://utu.fi/nefer>) launched this month.

Table 1. Proportions of childless at ages 35, 40, 45, and 50, men and women, Finland.

Figure 1. Predicted probability of childlessness (at age 42), interaction between educational level and partnership life course type (at age 18–39). Men born 1969–70.

Figure 2. Predicted probability of childlessness (at age 42), interaction between educational level and partnership life course type (at age 18–39). Women born 1969–70.

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