

The study investigates the effect of fears and uncertainties related to the postponement of fertility. Our findings are based on qualitative, problem-centred interviews.

Introduction

The starting point of the project was the question “**why people delay the realisation of their fertility until later in life.**” Even though we did not directly ask about worries and uncertainties, all respondents mentioned them in connection with different topics. It is obviously an important issue, which they, however, found difficult to talk about. In the recent literature, we can find papers about the impact of such uncertain economic conditions as unemployment and temporarily or generally unstable employment situations. Worries about the financial situation, being unemployed or at risk to lose one’s job are intensively discussed in the literature and seem to be a major reason for postponing fertility plans.

Sampling

The interviewees were selected on the basis of theoretical sampling and identified by snowball sampling. Wherever possible, we interviewed both partners of childless couples aged around 30.

	University degree	High school and above
Women	11	2
Men	3	6

Methodological approach

Problem-centred interviews.

The data were analysed with a combination of **grounded theory** and **objective hermeneutic sequence analysis**. We used ‘fine analysis’ and ‘rough analysis’ and the techniques of ‘open coding’, ‘axial coding’ and ‘selective coding’. Because qualitative research is a circular process, analysing and collecting data are not separate but very closely connected actions. This also implies that the project is not finished and more data will be collected and analysed in the future.

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Worries and fears about parenthood

Job situation and economic worries

- Women mostly fear to lose their career chances
- Women fear not to be able to remain in their field of work
- Women are unsure when to consider themselves settled in their job
- Financial issues are a good reason for postponing childbearing
- Economic independence is an issue for many women
- Women tend to see this issue more dramatically



- For men it is important to have a stable partner’s situation than about their own
- Men who intend to take parental leave fear that this might impair their career
- Men tend not to speak about financial worries
- If men mention this issue they tend to see it as being easily resolved

Social interaction

- Women often fear to end up as single mothers
- Women don’t worry what their relationship will be like when they have a child
- Women dislike the idea of ending up as housewives
- The opinion of close relatives/friends is important
- Women are stressed by the power-woman role model generated by the media
- Women fear that cannot lead their lives with their children the way they plan
- Partners who refuse to discuss the future cause stress
- Partners delaying the decision for a child cause stress



- Men do not fear to end up as weekend fathers
- Men fear that their relationship will suffer when they have a child
- Men do not want to be reduced to bread winners
- Men suffer if close relatives/friends think they should already be fathers
- The media hardly affect men
- Men tend to worry if they want to act differently to mainstream society
- Men worry about not fulfilling the wishes of their partner
- Partners delaying the decision for a child cause stress

Expectations and dreams

- Not knowing how to accomplish their dreams makes women uncertain
- Women fear they might not do things the best way
- Women always want to be perfect in everything



- Men have only vague ideas about their life with a child
- Many men fear to lose their independence and freedom
- Men fear that what they can offer a child is not enough

Health and age

- To Women fear to end up childless
- Age is a stress factor for women who want to have a child
- The older the woman the higher the pressure
- Women suffering from health problems worry about them and their consequences



- Men fear to end up childless
- Men worry about their partners’ age
- Men consider their own age less important for fatherhood
- Men worry about their partner’s health problems

Responsibility

- Women fear they might not act responsibly
- Women fear they might have to bear the burden of acting irresponsibly



- Men are afraid of shouldering the responsibility for a child
- Men are afraid of not yet being adult enough for a child

Theory

The **New Home Economics** approach assumes that decisions are made by calculating costs and benefits to increase utility (e.g., Becker 1992, Becker and Lewis 1974). People with high education and good jobs certainly do not want to lose a substantial part of their income by taking parental leave. The present economic situation and the circumstances expected for the future also produce insecurity and fears.

The **Second Demographic Transition Theory** tries to explain the causes of the European fertility postponement and decline. It assumes that “individual autonomy” and “female emancipation” are the main reasons for delaying family formation (Lesthaeghe 2003). According to this concept, certain values have changed over the last decades, and these values are guiding people’s behavior. **Easterlin** (1980) points out that people’s own childhoods shape their visions and ideas of the future. In particular negative experiences influence their view of life and make them worry about the future. However, childhood is not the only source of fears, which may also be the result of experiences made later in life.

It is assumed that the **influence of network members** also causes uncertainty. Witnessing how parents or close friends ended up as single mothers was often mentioned as a source of worries. This fear goes hand in hand with worrying about whether one has the right partner. Unless people are absolutely sure they made the right choice, they will think twice about having a child (Bernardi 2004).

The **life-course approach** is based on the idea that the structures of society shape regularities, while they are themselves shaped and changed by the action within a society (Blossfeld and Huinink 2001). The life course is viewed as a process, which is linked with other persons and with the values and norms within a society. Persons live in different spheres that are interconnected and interdependent (Huinink 2000).

Discussion

Differences between men and women regarding fears and worries concerning their parenthood are manifold. In general it can be said that **women report many more** worries and also go into more detail as compared to men. Financial worries were mainly mentioned by women and even though all of them lived in a partnership they considered their own situation as being decisive. Regarding the job situation, women reported to worry a lot about not being able to return to a good and interesting job or to miss chances. Men only talked about their work situation if they seriously considered parental leave.

People in the personal network and/or social norms can be other sources of stress. The own partner apparently has the highest stress potential. Watching network member experience such difficult situations as being a single mother creates worries. Being afraid to disappoint close relatives/friends or not to act according to accepted norms creates fears as well. Although this was more pronounced with women, men also reported several concerns in this direction. Not being able to reach your goals and to fulfil your dreams were also mentioned regularly. Men worry about their freedom or about not being able to offer enough to their child. Women often gave detailed accounts of their ideas about life.

Age and health were issues addressed from the women’s perspective. They were issues for both men and women. Men’s age and health were not mentioned in the interviews. Responsibility was also a topic discussed in great detail, though it was approached differently. While women wanted to act responsibly, make a good and clear decision, men feared the responsibility imposed on them by a child. They worried about not yet being ready to take on this task.