



Childlessness in the UK

ABSTRACT

Levels of childlessness in Britain are high in comparison with many other European countries, with just under one in five women currently reaching age 45 with no biological children of their own. This chapter provides new insights in two ways: First we combine childbearing data from repeated rounds of the General Household Survey and United Kingdom Household Panel Survey to identify how childlessness has increased at a similar rate among all educational groups, but that levels remain far higher among women with academic degree-level education. Secondly, the paper examines childlessness from a life course perspective among men and women born in 1970 who have been followed up within the British Cohort Study. Focusing on cohort members who were childless at age 30, we examine the relationship between fertility intentions expressed at age 30 and achieved childbearing by age 42. At age 42, those men and women who remained childless were invited to give their reasons for remaining childless. Some report that they did not have children 'due to health reasons', many more responded that they 'did not ever want children', whilst others said that they had 'not met the right partner to have children with'. Only a few suggested that they 'had been focused on their career'. We examine these responses in the context of the individual's partnership history and contribute to the debate as to whether the 'perpetual postponement' of childbearing to later ages is acting to increase the proportion who ultimately remain childless.

KEYWORDS

Childlessness; postponement childbearing; involuntary childless.

EDITORIAL NOTE

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1. INTRODUCTION

In Britain interest in the causes and consequences of childlessness has grown since the 1980s as a response to the increase in voluntary childlessness from the very low levels witnessed during the 1960s and early 1970s (e.g., Baum and Cope, 1980; Campbell, 1985; Kiernan, 1989). For some early authors childlessness was seen as “a mode of ultimate feminism” (McAllister & Clarke, 2000) and early studies focused on women who had been married for at least 10 years but had had no children (e.g., Kiernan, 1989). More recently, a life course approach has been taken to investigate the parental background and life course factors associated with fertility intentions and outcomes (McAllister and Clarke, 1990; Berrington, 2004; Kneale and Joshi, 2008; Simpson, 2009; Berrington and Pattaro, 2014). From the outset, research in this area has struggled with the difficulties in defining and measuring voluntary and involuntary childlessness, in differentiating between those who wish to postpone childbearing and those who do not want children, and in understanding the way in which individuals’ viewpoints are not fixed across the life course (Baum & Cope, 1980; Iacovou & Travares, 2011).

Britain is a particularly interesting case since it is one of the countries where overall aggregate levels of fertility are high (in a European context) with a completed family size of around 1.9 births per woman in a context of one of the higher levels of childlessness in Europe (at around 20%) (Coleman, 1996; Berrington et al., 2015). This paper provides new empirical evidence for Britain which helps us to understand this puzzle. We add to existing knowledge in a number of ways. Firstly, we examine how the educational gradient of childlessness has changed over birth cohorts; secondly we examine childlessness trends for both men and women using a unique cohort study of individuals born in Britain in one week of April, 1970. Using prospective data collected from this cohort during their adult years, we investigate how childbearing intentions of those childless at age 30 are associated with the likelihood of remaining childless at age 42. Finally, we examine the reasons given for not (yet) having had children among those childless at 42.

1.1. A CONTINUUM OF CHILDLISSNESS

Traditionally a distinction is made between those who are involuntary childless as a result of biological infertility and the voluntary childless who are childless by choice. However, this distinction is not necessarily clear-cut since, for example, individuals may not be fertile but be accepting of their childless situation (McAllister & Clarke, 2000). Involuntary childlessness can arise for reasons other than health problems. The terms “childless by circumstance” or “social infertility” (which includes those who do not have a suitable partner, or who have a partner who does not want children) are used in both academic research (e.g., Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007) and more generally (e.g., Black & Scull, 2005; Day, 2013). Indeed, a choice of infertility for one member of a couple may be circumstance for another (Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007). Several authors have suggested a continuum of childlessness (McAllister & Clarke, 2000; Letherby, 2002). On one end of the continuum is a small group who say from a young adult age that they do not want to have children – so called “early articulators” (Houseknecht 1987). Qualitative research has suggested that such women often feel they do not have an affinity for babies or young children. There is less support for the idea that these women are making their decision to remain childless to protect a high powered career (McAllister and Clarke, 2001; Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007). There are then women who are childless due to a medical condition. In between is a group that intended to have children but ended up without because of their circumstances (McAllister and Clarke 2000; Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Keizer et al. 2008). There is also a group that never made a decision to have a child. These women have sometimes been referred to as being “ambivalent” about childbearing. For these ambivalent women, childlessness is then the consequence of choosing to follow a particular life pattern rather than being a defined decision point.

Of particular relevance to the UK situation is the association between the rise in childlessness and the increased mean age at entry into parenthood, particularly for more educated women (Berrington et al., 2015). As more couples delay childbearing the issue of declining reproductive capacity with age becomes increasingly important. Extended periods in education and new career opportunities for women mean that many young adults drift into childlessness as a result of continuing to postpone

childbearing (Merz & Liefbroer, 2012). Such individuals who express a positive fertility intention but postpone childbearing until it is “too late” are described by Berrington (2004) as “perpetual postponers”. Recent UK data confirm that very few individuals report that they wish to remain childless, even among those in their thirties (Ni Bhrolchain et al., 2010; Berrington & Pattaro, 2014). Some of these men and women will not be able to have the children they desire due to increased infecundability with age. It is difficult to quantify exactly what proportion of women who try for their first baby at older ages will not succeed. Recent estimates show the increase in sterility to rise after age 35 and especially after age 40, and that this rise is due not only to difficulties in conceiving but increased foetal loss with age (Leridon, 2008; Eijkemans et al., 2014).

In summary, childless men and women are a very heterogeneous group. Both “active” and “passive” decision making occurs across the life course which results in some individuals not having children (Gillespie 1999). Individuals can move along the childlessness continuum over time as their own life course develops (Baum and Cope, 1980; McAllister and Clarke, 2000). As noted by Miettinen (2010: p. 20) “For many, the decision not to have children may be a consequence of a process, where childbearing is postponed due to reasons related to relationship, personal considerations as well as financial and work-related constraints until it is too late to have children.”

There is a risk when studying childlessness that the researcher inadvertently identifies men and women without children as somehow lacking in something or deviant from the norm. Some commentators prefer to use the term “childfree” rather than “childless” emphasising the positive choice many couples make in deciding not to have children, for example the wish to have the freedom and increased income (McAllister and Clarke, 2000; Carmichael and Whittaker, 2007). In this paper I use the term childlessness in its demographic sense to describe a person who has not had had a biological child of their own, noting that many, especially men, act as social parents to children who may not be their own biological children.

Much previous work on childlessness has focused on women. In part this relates to data constraints. Data published within the vital registration system links births to

their mother's characteristics (ONS, 2014), whilst many surveys (e.g., the British General Household Survey) confine asking questions on past fertility to women only. It is important however, to consider men's experiences of childlessness as well (Jamieson et al., 2010). Choosing not to become a parent may not be accepted for men and women to the same extent (Rijkin & Merz 2014). Furthermore, the factors associated with remaining childless are likely to differ by gender, for example as a result of gender differences in the opportunity costs of childbearing. Moreover, decisions about childbearing are often made in a couple context, although rarely is the interaction between partners' desires and intentions examined. Qualitative UK research suggests that ambivalent women can be swayed either way by their partners views (McAllister & Clarke, 2000), whilst quantitative research using longitudinal data suggests that conflicting intentions between partners may be more important in reducing the probability of going on to have further children, than in the likelihood of becoming a parent (Berrington, 2004). Among childless couples, research has tended to find that women's intentions are stronger predictors of entry into parenthood than men's.

1.2. AIMS OF THIS PAPER

This paper provides new insight by taking an approach which compares findings for men and women and those from different educational backgrounds. The following research questions are examined: How has the level of childlessness changed across birth cohorts of women and how does this differ according to highest level of education? What proportion of childless individuals in their thirties say they intend to have children? Does this differ by gender or level of education? What proportion of "postponers" go on to have a birth by age 42? How does this vary by gender, education and partnership history? What reasons do people give for not having a child at age 42? How does this vary by gender, level of education and partnership history?

2. DATA SOURCES

Three data sources are used: vital registration data; retrospective fertility histories from a series of cross-sectional surveys; and longitudinal prospective data collected within a national birth cohort study. Below we describe the latter two data sources in

more detail. In terms of vital registration data, a long time-series of data on the proportions who remain childless are provided by the Office for National Statistics (ONS, 2014) based on births registered in England and Wales. However, these data are only available for women and are not broken down according to any socio-economic characteristics.

2.1. RETROSPECTIVE FERTILITY HISTORIES FROM GENERAL HOUSEHOLD SURVEY AND UNITED KINGDOM HOUSEHOLD LONGITUDINAL STUDY.

In order to examine how educational differentials in childlessness have changed over cohorts we use a specially constructed dataset which combines data from repeated retrospective surveys of women carried out between 1979 and 2009 (General Household Survey Time Series dataset¹) (Beaujouan et al., 2014). This dataset is augmented by retrospective fertility data for recent cohorts collected within wave 1 of the United Kingdom Household Panel Survey (UKHLS) (Knies, 2014). Both the General Household Survey and UKHLS collect information on educational attainment at the time of leaving full time education and also retrospective childbearing histories and have been used to examine educational differentials in the timing and quantum of fertility in Britain (Ni Bhrolchaín & Beaujouan, 2012; Berrington et al., 2015). Childlessness estimates are based on women aged 40-49 at the time of the survey. Women's highest qualification on first leaving education (i.e., at the end of continuous education) provides the best available indication of educational attainment prior to entry (or potential entry) into motherhood². The analyses here use four categories of education: Less than Secondary level; Secondary level; Advanced level; Academic Degree or equivalent. Secondary level qualifications are equivalent to a school leaving qualification taken at age 16 years. Advanced level qualifications are taken at age 18 years and are generally required in order to progress to a tertiary (university) educational setting. The interpretation of changing educational differentials in fertility over time is made complex by the changing composition of the

¹ The data are weighted to take account of survey design and non-response (Beaujouan, Brown, and Ni Bhrolchaín 2011; Knies, 2014).

² We recognise that there will be some women for whom their level of educational attainment is a result of their childbearing patterns. That is to say some of the youngest mothers may have had to leave full time education as a result of becoming pregnant.

British population by education. The proportion of the female population with either no qualifications or who fail to achieve any Secondary level qualifications at the end of compulsory schooling (generally at age 16), decreases from 64% among women born 1940-49, to just 18% of women born 1960-68. At the same time, the proportion with an academic degree or other higher level qualification increases from 9% to 20%.

2.2. PROSPECTIVE DATA FROM 1970 BRITISH BIRTH COHORT

Prospective longitudinal data are required in order to examine fertility intentions and their association with subsequent fertility behaviour. The UK is fortunate to have a number of birth cohort studies that have followed up respondents from birth to adulthood. Data collected from those born in Britain in 1946 and 1958 and have provided new insights into the parental background and life course factors associated with intentions to remain childless and childbearing outcomes (Kiernan, 1989; Kneale & Joshi, 2008; Berrington & Pattaro, 2014). In this paper we use data for men and women born in Britain in one week of April 1970 who have been followed up in multiple waves of data collection throughout childhood and early adulthood to age 42 (Elliott & Shepherd, 2006)³. We focus on those childless at age 30 (3,209 childless men and 2,603 childless women). Overall, 60% of men and 46% of women born in 1970 remained childless at age 30, but a far higher proportion of academic degree-educated men and women remain childless at 30 (80% of academic degree-educated men and 69% of academic degree-educated women) reflecting the postponement of childbearing among those with higher levels of education.

At age 30 respondents were asked “Do you intend to have any children?” Possible answers are: “yes”, “no” and “don’t know”. At the age 42 sweep of the survey respondents provide details of their achieved fertility. Analyses comparing fertility intentions with outcomes are restricted to those responding at both age 30 and 42. Of those childless at age 30, 73% of men and 80% of women also took part at age

³ Since this is a birth cohort study of those born in Britain in 1970 the sample is primarily white British. No attempt is therefore made to examine ethnic differences in childlessness. Further details of the ongoing study can be found here: <http://www.cls.ioe.ac.uk/>.

42⁴. Those childless at 42 are given a showcard of possible reasons for not yet having children (see Appendix A). Respondents were invited to tick as many reasons as were applicable to themselves. Those who ticked more than reason were then asked to identify their most important reason. In this paper we focus on the most important reason given.

3. CHILDLESSNESS TRENDS IN THE UK

3.1. HISTORICAL TREND IN CHILDLESSNESS

Figure 1 shows the percentage in England and Wales who remained childless at age 30, and at the end of their reproductive period for women born between 1920 and 1983. Levels of childlessness at the end of childbearing were at a minimum for women born in the 1940s before rising (and subsequently stabilising for women born in the 1960s. For example among the 1946 birth cohort, just 9% had not had a child at completion of childbearing. The equivalent figures for women born in 1968 (the most recent cohort to reach age 45) is 18%. Childlessness increased first for cohorts born in the 1950s who were also the cohorts to first start postponing first birth (Office for National Statistics 2014). These two trends are related and later in this paper we examine the achievement of fertility intentions among “postponers”.

The current levels of childlessness are not however historically unprecedented. As is the case for many other European countries (Dykstra, 2009) and the United States (Morgan, 1991) there is a U-shaped relationship with birth cohort. In historical England and Wales, and right through to the early twentieth century over a fifth remained childless, largely as a result of non-marriage (Hajnal, 1965).

⁴ Response rates were slightly higher among degree- educated men and women (80% and 85% respectively). Thus reasons for childlessness may over-represent more advantaged socio-economic groups.

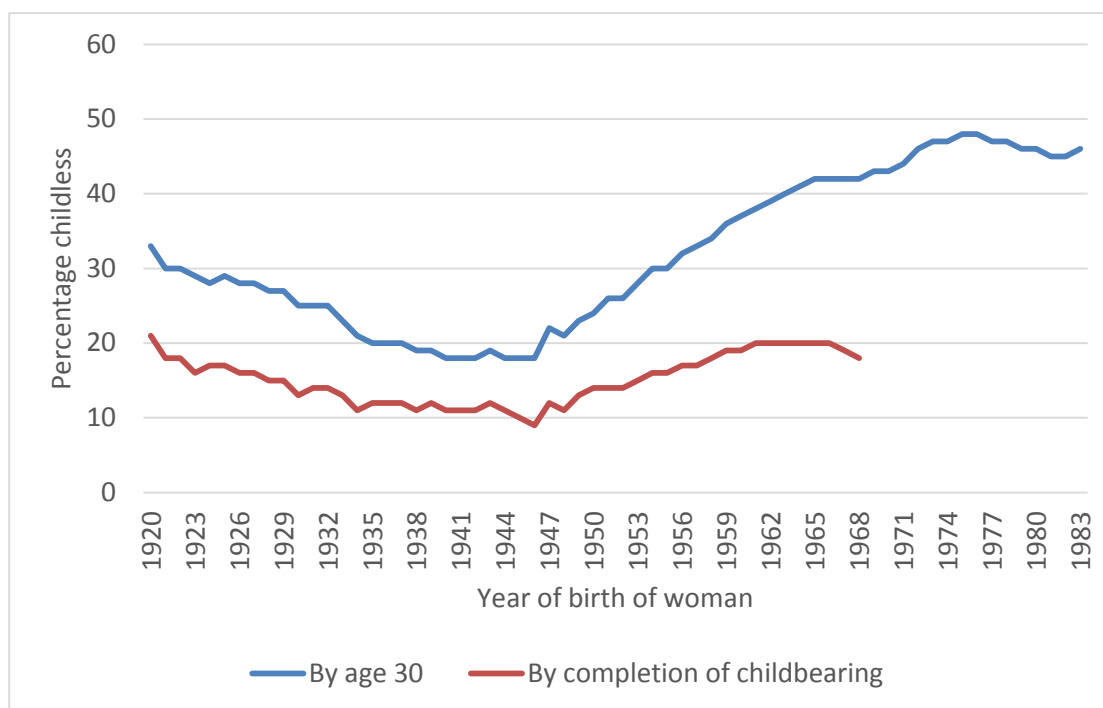


Figure 1: Percentage of women remaining childless by their 30th birthday and completion of childbearing, by year of birth of woman. England and Wales.

Source: ONS (2014)

Historically there was a tradition of late marriage and high proportions never married in Britain - part of the West European Marriage Pattern as described by Hajnal (1965). In the early twentieth century high levels of non-marriage were associated with imbalances in the sex ratio resulting from excess male emigration and male mortality during the First World War (Kiernan, 1988; Dykstra, 2009). Additionally, as noted by Holden (2005), non-marriage may have become economically feasible for middle- and upper-class women due to the availability of jobs in light industry, services and businesses in urban areas.

What is different today, as compared with historical cohorts, is the level of childlessness at age 30 associated with the postponement of the start of parenthood to older ages. 18% of women born in 1946 were childless at age 30 rising to 42% for women born in 1968 and 46% of those born in 1983. The data suggest however that postponement and the trend towards increased childlessness has now stopped – and may have gone into reverse, since the proportion childless at 30 peaked for women born in the mid-1970s.

3.2. EDUCATIONAL DIFFERENTIALS IN CHILDLESSNESS IN THE UK

Figure 2 below shows the proportions of British women who were childless at age 40 according to birth cohort and highest educational level on first leaving full time education. The positive educational gradient in childlessness existed in all birth cohorts starting with women born in the 1940s (Figure 2). The proportion childless among respondents with a tertiary education is roughly double that found for those with no or below Secondary qualifications (i.e., the least educated). Over time the educational gradient has increased very slightly as a result of faster increases in childlessness among women with tertiary education. Thus for British women born in the 1960s, 22% of graduates and 10% of the least educated group remain childless.

These strong educational differences have tended to fuel discourses in the media that assume many high educated women in Britain are choosing to remain childless in order to “pursue a career”, or that they have postponed starting a family due to conflicting demands of a career and have left it “too late” to have a child (McAllister and Clarke, 2000; Hadfield et al. 2007). The next sections examine the likelihood of highly educated women intending to remain childless and how this compares to their male counterparts.

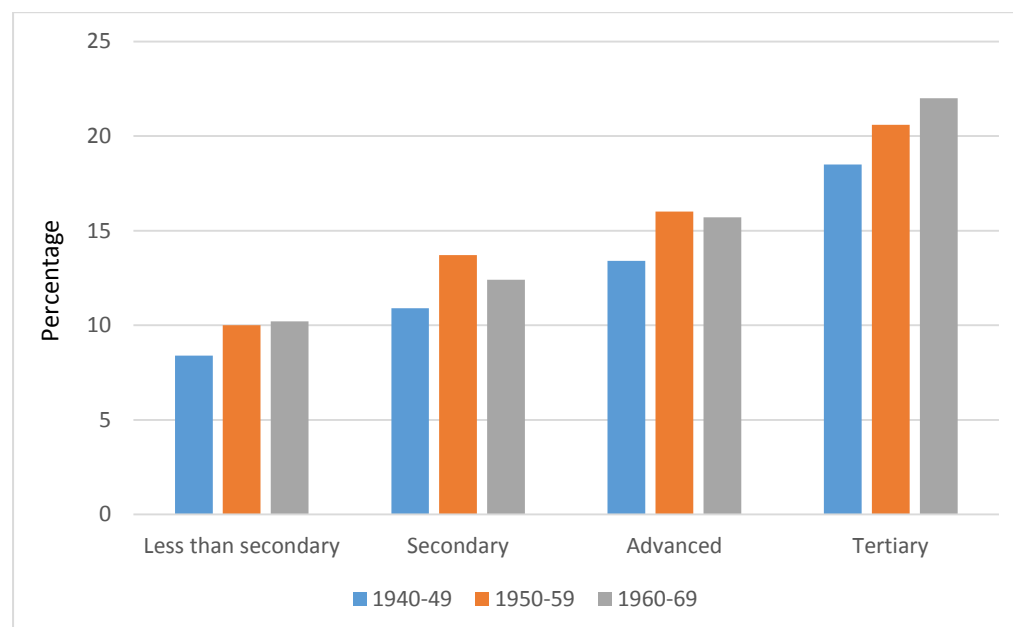


Figure 2: Percentage childless by birth cohort and highest level of education. British women aged 40-49 born 1940-69.

Source: Author’s analysis of CPC General Household Survey Time Series and UKHLS.

4. FERTILITY INTENTIONS AND CHILDLISSNESS

4.1. FERTILITY INTENTIONS

Research findings using a number of different data sources consistently find that few British men and women intend to remain childless, at least if we take survey responses on intentions at their face value (Berrington, 2004; Ni Bhrolchain et al., 2010; Berrington & Pattaro, 2014). It is found that the proportion intending to remain childless increases with age, as individuals adjust their intentions according to lived experiences (Berrington, 2004; Iacovou & Travares, 2011). Nevertheless, even among those childless in their thirties there remains a strong desire for children consistent with the notion that individuals are postponing their childbearing to later ages rather than rejecting parenthood altogether (Ni Bhrolchain et al., 2010; Berrington and Pattaro, 2014). Table 1 below presents the childbearing intentions at age 30 for childless men and women born in Britain in 1970 according to highest level of qualification.

		Yes	Don't know	No	Self/partner not able to have children	Number of cases
Men	Less than secondary	57.2	22.8	16.3	3.7	754
	Secondary	62.6	21.5	13.1	2.8	1,044
	Advanced	64.1	22.0	11.5	2.4	460
	Tertiary	69.3	19.3	10.2	1.3	945
	Total	63.5	21.2	12.8	2.5	3,203
Women	Less than secondary	58.1	18.9	15.0	8.1	434
	Secondary	63.2	14.3	14.4	8.0	810
	Advanced	66.8	17.1	11.8	4.3	397
	Tertiary	67.6	19.5	9.7	3.1	958
	Total	64.5	17.4	12.4	5.7	2599

Table 1: Intention to have a child according to highest level of education. Childless men and women aged 30. 1970 British birth cohort. Row Percent.

Source: Author's analysis of BCS70.

Overall, around 3% of men and 6% of women said that either themselves or their partner were unable to have children. The percentage reporting infertility problems is much higher for those with lower levels of education, reflecting a selection effect whereby low educated men and women who remain childless at age 30 are a select subset of all those with lower levels of education who would typically start their childbearing at earlier ages (Kneale & Joshi, 2008; Berrington et al., 2015). Overall, childbearing intentions at age 30 are remarkably similar according to gender: Around two thirds of both childless men and women expressed an intention to have at least one child, 12% said that they did not intend to have a child, whilst one in five were unsure. Tertiary educated childless men and women were more likely to express a positive intention, whilst those with the least education were more likely to express a negative intention. The majority then can be classified as postponers – they have a positive intention to have a child, but they remain childless. However the fact that one in five of the group are uncertain suggests that circumstances could easily play a role in shaping decisions one way or another.

4.2. FERTILITY OUTCOMES

Next we examine whether the respondents who were childless at age 30 did indeed go on to have a child by the age 42 interview, in 2012. Once again, there is remarkable consistency in the findings for childless men and women (Figure 3). Fertility intentions are a good predictor of fertility outcomes: around 30% of those who intended to have a child remained childless at age 42, compared to around half of those who were uncertain in their intentions, and around three-quarters who said that they did not intend. Half of both male and female postponers, i.e. those who intended to have children, went on to have two or more children. Of those who did not intend to have any children, 11% of men and 18% of women went on to have at least one child. Thus fertility intentions are both under and over achieved, but they are more likely to be under-achieved. Men and women with uncertain intentions appear to behave in a similar fashion – being quite likely to remain childless or to have just one child and less likely than those with positive intentions to go on to have a second child.

In further analyses (not shown) we find that highly educated men and women are more likely to achieve their positive intentions for childbearing at older ages. This is consistent with earlier findings (Berrington, 2004; Berrington & Pattaro, 2014) and is likely to be related to the selection effect whereby those from lower educational groups who remain childless at age 30 are more likely to have other socio-demographic characteristics (e.g. health problems) which mean they have a lower likelihood of becoming a parent.

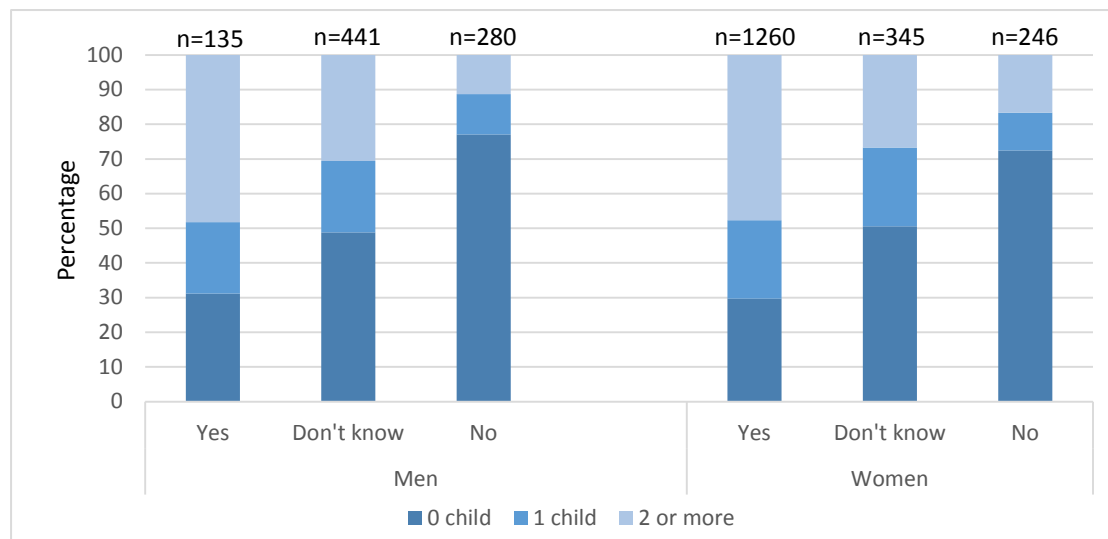


Figure 3: Distribution of achieved family size at age 42, according to intentions at age 30. 1970 British Cohort Study members who were childless at age 30.

Source: Author's analysis of BCS70.

4.3. PARTNERSHIP EXPERIENCE AND LIKELIHOOD OF ACHIEVING INTENTIONS

An important pathway through which positive fertility intentions remain unrealised is through the respondent's partnership experiences (McAllister & Clark, 2000; Berrington, 2004; Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Berrington & Pattaro, 2014). Let us take BCS70 cohort members who were childless and had never lived in a co-residential union at age 30 but who had a positive intention to have a child. Table 2 shows the percentage who remained childless according to their partnership status at age 42. We cannot of course tell from these data the extent to which partnership status is having a causal effect on childlessness since both partnership formation and

childbearing are likely to both be influenced by other factors such as the respondent's health status, work ambitions, attitudes to family formation and so on. Nevertheless the table shows the key relevance of partnering in the experience of childless over the life course.

	Partnership status at 42	% childless
Men	Never married no partner	92
	Never married currently cohabiting	50
	Currently married	20
	Div/sep/wid no partner	43
	Div/sep/wid currently cohabiting	40
	Civil partnership /ex civil partnership	100
	Women	Never married no partner
Never married currently cohabiting		52
Currently married		23
Div/sep/wid no partner		27
Div/sep/wid currently cohabiting		75
Civil partnership /ex civil partnership		50

Table 2: Percentage childless according to partnership status at age 42. 1970 British Cohort Study members who were childless and had never had a co-residential union at age 30.

Source: Author's analysis of BCS70.

The vast majority (nine out of ten men and eight out of ten women) of those who at age 42 remained never married and did not have a co-residential partner remained childless. In comparison about half of those who at age 42 were in a cohabiting relationship remained childless. The group most likely to achieve their fertility intention was those who married after age 30 and remained married at 42 – only one fifth of this group remained childless. In comparison, levels of childlessness are higher among those who married after age 30 but subsequently separated.

5. REASONS FOR REMAINING CHILDLESS

Of the age 42 respondents to the BCS, almost exactly one quarter of men (25.4%) and just under one fifth (19.0%) of women had never had a biological child of their own. Consistent with our earlier findings for women based on the General Household Survey/Understanding Society surveys (section 3.2), there is a strong positive educational gradient in the proportion childless among women. One quarter of female graduates born in 1970 remained childless as compared to 15% of women with less than secondary qualifications⁵. However, among male cohort members, differences in the proportion remaining childless according to highest level of education are much smaller (27.1% of male graduates were childless at 42, compared to 23.2% of men with less than secondary level qualifications).

5.1. WORK AND CAREERS NOT REPORTED AS THE MAIN REASON

Table 3 shows the reasons for not yet having had children as reported by childless respondents at age 42. Recall that respondents were asked to tick possible reasons as given in Appendix 1. Three main reasons dominate the responses. The most common reason given was that the respondent had not wanted children (28% of men and 31% of women). The second most common reason was that they had never met the right person (23% of men and 19% of women gave this as their most important reason). A similar number of women gave health reasons – either their own, or partner’s infertility or some other health cause. Men were less likely to cite their own infertility as a motive.

Other reasons were less prevalent. A small number (3% of men and 4% of women) cited the fact that their partner did not want children which reminds us of the importance of the couple in childbearing behaviour. A significant minority, 18% of male and 12% of female childless respondents, did not tick any reason.

⁵ For this analysis only, educational attainment is measured at age 42 so as to maximise sample size.

	Men	Women
	%	%
Not wanted children	28	31
Never met right person	23	19
Own infertility	3	12
Other health reason	2	4
Partner's infertility	4	3
Wanted children but not got round to it	6	5
Partner not wanted children	3	4
I have been focused on my career	3	2
Financial / housing situation would have made it difficult	2	2
Other reason	2	2
Partner has been sterilised /vasectomy/hysterectomy	1	1
Partner already has children & not wanted more	1	1
In a same sex partnership ¹	1	0
Not wanted compromise relationship	1	0
No particular reason	18	12
Don't want to answer	2	3
TOTAL	976 (100%)	845 (100%)

Table 3: Most important reason for remaining childless. Childless men and women aged 42 born in Britain in 1970. Column Percent.

Notes: ¹“In a same sex partnership” was one of the write in responses that respondents added to the list of possible answers (See Appendix).

Source: Author’s analysis of BCS70.

Some respondents did agree with the statement that they had wanted children but had not got round to it suggesting an ambivalence in childbearing. Just 3% of men and 2% of women cited being focused on their career as the main reason for remaining childless. In further analyses (not shown) we compare the reasons given according to highest level of education. Whilst childless graduates were slightly more likely to respond that they had focused on their career it was only 4% of men and 3% of women. These findings are in stark contrast to the media discourses which portray women as being too focused on their career.

In fact we see two main differences in the distribution of reasons for childlessness according to highest level of education. Firstly, health reasons were cited by a higher proportion of the least educated women. Secondly, both male and female graduates had a higher tendency to report that they had never met the right person. 30% of male graduates gave this response as their main motive as compared to 19% of males with less than secondary education. Among women the corresponding figures were 34% for female graduates and 28% for those with less than secondary qualifications.

5.2. THE IMPORTANCE OF HAVING A PARTNER

Table 4 presents the reason for remaining childless according to legal marital status at age 42. We show the pattern for women only since the findings for men are very similar. Those who had been married but who had remained childless were more likely to cite either that they had not wanted children, or that there were health reasons preventing them having children. Contrastingly, almost one third of those who had never married said they had never met the right person. A further 30% of those never married said that they had not wanted children.

Interestingly, the proportion who reported that their partner had not wanted children is slightly higher for those now divorced or separated – at around 6%. The divorced, separated and widowed group are also quite likely to say that they had not met the right person.

	Married	Div/wid/sep	Never married
Not want children	34	26	30
Health reasons ¹	32	24	12
Wanted but not got round to it	5	5	5
Partner not wanted children	3	6	3
Never met the right person	2	14	31
I have been focused on career	3	4	1
No particular reason	10	11	12
Other & don't know ²	6	8	4
Don't want to say	4	3	2
Total	264	111	452
	(100%)	(100%)	(100%)

Table 4: Most important reason for remaining childless according to legal marital status at age 42. Childless women followed up 1970 British Cohort Study members. Column Percent.

Notes: ¹Health reasons includes "own and partners infertility". ²Other includes "financial and housing worries", "partner already had children", "not wanted to compromise relationship", and "in a same sex partnership".

Source: Author's analysis of BCS70.

6. DISCUSSION

This paper has provided new insights into childlessness in Britain by showing how the overall trend masks considerable educational differences in the likelihood of not having had children. Unlike some other European countries such as the Netherlands (van Agtmaal-Wobma & van Huis 2008) and Norway (Andersson et al., 2009) educational differentials in childlessness are not narrowing over time, but remain large and slightly increasing. Today, tertiary-educated women are roughly twice as likely to remain childless than those with low levels of education. The co-existence in Britain of relatively large completed family sizes (of around 1.9 children per woman) alongside high levels of childlessness, results from different childbearing patterns within different sub-groups of the population (Berrington et al., 2015). High levels of childlessness among tertiary-educated women are being off-set by relatively high rates of progression to third and fourth births especially among mothers with the lowest levels of education (Berrington et al., 2015). Cohort fertility rates for women

born in the 1980s suggest that the previous increase in childlessness, both at age 30, and at completion of childbearing, may have ceased. Thus we may not see the very high levels of childlessness currently experienced for example in Austria and Italy.

Levels of childlessness, at least at age 42, are higher for British men than they are for women, although there is of course the possibility of fatherhood at older ages. Nevertheless a significant minority of men remain childless. In contrast to the situation for women, educational differentials in childlessness for men are much smaller. The proportion of men without children is high both among more educated and less educated men, though we might speculate that the pathways through which this occurs differ according to socio-economic status. Consistent with Demey and colleagues (2014) we see a significant minority of socio-economically disadvantaged men who are not given the opportunity for family formation. Quantitative evidence from the 1970 and previous 1958 British cohorts (Berrington & Pattaro, 2014) and qualitative evidence from Jamieson and colleagues (2010) suggest that for some men (particularly socio-economically disadvantaged men), finding a partner can be very difficult and indirectly leads to unfulfilled childbearing intentions. Whilst there are some low educated women who are unable to fulfil their childbearing intentions between age 30 and 42, their number is much smaller as compared to men.

The findings regarding fertility intentions and outcomes for the 1970 British birth cohort suggest that relatively few men and women are rejecting parenthood. In terms of the “continuum of childlessness” this so-called “certain group” (or “early articulators”) who declare that they do not intend to have children are a minority (around about one in eight of those childless at 30)⁶. The majority of both men and women are “postponers” - at age 30 just under two thirds of childless men and women express a positive intention. There is a considerable group of childless men and women who report uncertain fertility intentions. Some of these respondents would probably fall into the “ambivalent group” as discussed by McAllister and Clarke (2000) who have not explicitly considered whether or not they intend to have children. Other uncertain respondents may have considered the question as to their

⁶ We note that there may be a social desirability effect whereby British respondents may be unwilling to express a desire to remain childless given a society that is pro-natalist e.g. in terms of media coverage (Hadfield, 2007).

ideal family size but remain uncertain since they are unsure of their situation, for example in terms of whether they will have a suitable partner who also wants children, or the availability of childcare. The significance of uncertainty in fertility intentions has not received the attention it should (although see Berrington, 2004; Ni Bhrolchain et al., 2010). Evidence from the 1970 cohort suggests that those who are uncertain have an intermediate chance of having a first birth – in between those who had a negative and those who had a positive intention. Thus, if we had included those uncertain in our group with positive fertility intentions then we would have estimated a lower level of agreement between intentions and outcomes. Moreover, uncertain intentions might reflect the fact that intentions for childbearing can be affected by period circumstances such as partnership status and availability of childcare, some of which could be affected by social policy changes.

Consistent with findings from earlier UK and US cohorts, respondents both under- and over- achieve their intended fertility (Morgan & Rackin, 2010; Berrington & Pattaro, 2014), but childless “postponers” are more likely to under-achieve – overall 30% of those childless at 30 who intended a child were still childless at 42. Interestingly this figure is almost identical for male and female postponers. Of course, there is the possibility that intentions might be modified between age 30 and 42, for example as a result of partnership experiences and work situations. Consistent with Berrington (2004) the percentage of “postponers” who achieve their intention is higher among men and women with higher levels of education and those who marry (and stay married). Over a third of “postponing” men with no, or secondary level qualifications will remain childless at 42. Morgan (1991) cautioned against viewing childlessness as a modern phenomenon and suggested that the reasons may not be totally different to previous generations. In our British cohort, childless respondents give a variety of reasons for not having a child at age 42: around 3 in 10 say they “had not wanted children”, and 2 in 10 say “never met right person”. Health issues are also frequently cited, especially by women who are more likely to report their own infertility problems. It would be useful to know the extent to which these health problems were associated with the postponement of fertility and declining fecundability with advanced age. In this way, the association between increased postponement and increased childlessness among cohorts born from the 1950s onwards could potentially be causal.

Few men or women reported “not having got round to it” or being “focused on career” as reasons for childlessness. The relative unimportance of career demands on reported reasons for childlessness is consistent with previous research for the UK, Australia and Finland (McAllister & Clarke, 2000; Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Miettinen, 2010). Reported reasons for childlessness were similar according to gender and level of education but differed more according to partnership history. Finding and keeping hold of an appropriate partner appears to be key.

This study has a number of limitations: the type of evidence collected in quantitative surveys is limited and there are likely to be social desirability effects and post-hoc rationalization of the numbers of children individuals desire. Furthermore, we present intentions as measured at age 30 and outcomes at age 42. It would be interesting to know how intentions change between age 30 and 42 in response to life course events. Secondly, whilst this study is novel in that we have data for both men and women, these are not couples. Childbearing is generally a couple-level activity and ideally the preferences and constraints of both partners should be investigated. Finally we note that many of the reasons offered to respondents in the BCS70 questionnaire for not yet having children are negative reasons – for example, poor health, not finding the right partner. Ideally, reasons offered should also include positive pull factors of being childfree, for example the greater freedom and wealth that results. Around 30% of childless women ticked the “not wanted to have children” box. But this still leaves open the question as to why they did not want children.

In summary, the postponement of childbearing has been particularly strong for more educated women in the UK and it is possible that postponement (and the subsequent inability to recuperate intended births) may contribute to educational differentials in childlessness (Berrington 2004; Berrington et al 2015). Childlessness increased first for cohorts born in the 1950s who were also the cohorts to start postponing first birth. It is not possible to say whether there is a causal relationship between the two trends (e.g., as a result of reduced fecundability with age) since postponement and childlessness could both be regarded as manifestations of underlying changes in women’s lives, such as opportunities for women to develop a

career, the availability of reliable contraception and increased partnership postponement and instability.

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**APPENDIX: MOST IMPORTANT REASON FOR REMAINING
CHILDLESS SHOWCARD. 1970 BRITISH BIRTH COHORT
STUDY, AGE 42 QUESTIONNAIRE.**

1. Infertility problems
2. Partner sterilised , had vasectomy/hysterectomy
3. Other health reasons
4. I have not wanted to have children
5. I have wanted to have children but not got round to it
6. I have been focused on my career
7. I have never met the right person to have children with
8. My partner has not wanted to have children
9. My partner already has children and has not wanted more
10. I have not wanted to compromise my relationship with my partner
11. My financial situation would have made it difficult
12. My housing situation would have made it difficult
13. No particular reason
14. Other reason – please write in

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