

## **Remaining childless**

Causes and consequences from a life course perspective

Renske Keizer

Keizer, R.

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Causes and consequences from a life course perspective

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# **Remaining childless**

## Causes and consequences from a life course perspective

Kinderloos blijven

Oorzaken en gevolgen vanuit een levensloopperspectief  
(met een samenvatting in het Nederlands)

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Renske Keizer

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Promotor: Prof. dr. P. A. Dykstra  
Co-promotor: Dr. A.-R. Poortman

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*Voor mijn moeder*

## Voorwoord

In 2005 begon ik met het onderzoek waarvan het boek dat voor u ligt het resultaat is. Vier jaren van denken, lezen, analyseren, en schrijven lagen voor me. Vier hele jaren! En nu is het opeens klaar. Hoe snel kan de tijd gaan! Dat de tijd is omgevlogen, heeft met een aantal zaken te maken, niet in de laatste plaats met het plezier dat ik heb gehad in het schrijven van dit proefschrift. Een aantal mensen wil ik op deze plaats daarvoor bedanken; voor hun bijdrage aan de totstandkoming van dit proefschrift en aan het plezier waarmee het is geschreven.

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# Contents

<b>List of Tables</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>List of Figures</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>1 Introduction</b> .....	<b>17</b>
1.1 Childlessness and fertility .....	19
1.2 Theories on fertility.....	20
1.3 Relevance of studying childlessness .....	21
1.3.1 Societal relevance .....	21
1.3.2 Scientific relevance .....	22
1.4 Research objectives.....	24
1.5 Theoretical approach: Life course perspective .....	25
1.6 Research questions.....	26
1.6.1 Pathways into childlessness.....	26
1.6.2 Childlessness and social cohesion .....	27
1.6.3 Childlessness and social inequality .....	28
1.6.4 A focus on middle-aged childless men.....	29
1.7 Innovation .....	29
1.7.1 Theoretical innovation.....	29
1.7.2 Methodological innovation.....	30
1.8 Data: The Netherlands Kinship Panel Study .....	31
1.9 Structure of the book.....	32
<b>2 Pathways into childlessness: Evidence of gendered life course dynamics</b> .....	<b>35</b>
2.1 Introduction.....	37
2.2 Pathways into childlessness .....	38
2.3 Method.....	42
2.3.1 Data source .....	42
2.3.2 Measures.....	43
2.4 Results.....	45
2.4.1 Preliminary analyses.....	45
2.4.2 Primary analyses.....	46
2.5 Discussion .....	47
2.5.1 Conclusions and implications.....	47
2.5.2 Limitations and future directions.....	49

<b>3</b>	<b>Childlessness and norms of familial responsibility.....</b>	<b>51</b>
3.1	Introduction.....	53
3.2	Childlessness and norms of familial responsibility .....	55
3.3	Data and method .....	57
	3.3.1 Data source.....	57
	3.3.2 Dependent variables .....	57
	3.3.3 Independent variables.....	58
	3.3.4 Control variables .....	59
	3.3.5 Analytic strategy.....	59
3.4	Results.....	60
3.5	Conclusions.....	65
<b>4</b>	<b>The transition to parenthood and well-being: The impact of partner status and work hour transitions.....</b>	<b>69</b>
4.1	Introduction.....	71
4.2	Theoretical framework.....	72
	4.2.1 Partner status and work hour transitions .....	72
	4.2.2 Well-being .....	73
	4.2.3 A separate focus on women and men .....	75
4.3	Method .....	75
	4.3.1 Data.....	75
	4.3.2 Analyses .....	76
	4.3.3 Measures.....	77
4.4	Results.....	81
4.5	Discussion .....	87
<b>5</b>	<b>Life outcomes of childless men and fathers.....</b>	<b>91</b>
5.1	Introduction.....	93
5.2	Theoretical background and hypothesis.....	94
	5.2.1 The structuring influence of fatherhood.....	94
	5.2.2 Partnership history.....	98
5.3	Method .....	98
	5.3.1 Data source .....	98
	5.3.2 Measures.....	99
5.4	Analyses.....	103
	5.4.1 Preliminary analyses.....	103
	5.4.2 Primary analyses.....	103
5.5	Results.....	104

5.6	Discussion .....	109
5.6.1	Conclusions and implications.....	109
5.6.2	Limitations and future directions.....	111
<b>6</b>	<b>Conclusion and discussion.....</b>	<b>113</b>
6.1	Background and questions of the study .....	115
6.2	Summary of findings.....	115
6.2.1	Pathways into childlessness.....	115
6.2.2	Childlessness and social cohesion .....	116
6.2.3	Childlessness and social inequality .....	119
6.2.4	A focus on middle-aged childless men.....	120
6.3	Discussion of findings.....	121
6.3.1	Contribution to childlessness research .....	121
6.3.2	Policy implications .....	123
6.4	Suggestions for future research.....	126
6.4.1	Limitation-based suggestions for future research.....	126
6.4.2	Findings-based suggestions for future research .....	128
	<b>Samenvatting (summary in Dutch).....</b>	<b>131</b>
	<b>References.....</b>	<b>141</b>
	<b>Curriculum Vitae.....</b>	<b>159</b>
	<b>ICS Dissertation Series.....</b>	<b>161</b>



## List of Tables

Table 2.1	Expected effects on the likelihood of being childless, by gender.....	42
Table 2.2	Mean and standard deviations for predictors in the analysis, by gender.....	45
Table 2.3	Logistic regression analysis for variables predicting remaining childless for women (n = 2867) and men (n =2195), controlling for birth year.....	47
Table 3.1	Descriptive statistics of the dependent, independent and control variables, by gender.....	61
Table 4.1	Descriptive statistics.....	79
Table 4.2	Number of respondents making various partner status and work hour transitions.....	80
Table 4.3	Fixed effects analyses for women (n = 338).....	83
Table 4.4	Fixed effect analyses for men (n = 262).....	85
Table 5.1	Descriptive statistics (n = 1451).....	103
Table 5.2	Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting men’s social activities (n = 1451).....	106
Table 5.3	Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting men’s health and economic activities (n = 1451).....	107
Table 5.4	Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting men’s well-being (n = 1451).....	108



## List of Figures

Figure 3.1	Women’s norms of universal familial responsibility.....	62
Figure 3.2	Men’s norms of universal familial responsibility.....	63
Figure 3.3	Women’s norms of personal familial responsibility.....	63
Figure 3.4	Men’s norms of personal familial responsibility.....	64

## Appendix

Appendix 3.1	Adjusted means and tests of significance.....	67
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# Chapter 1

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Introduction



## 1.1 Childlessness and fertility

Many developed countries have undergone or are undergoing a massive fertility transition (Morgan, 2003), shifting from high to low fertility, with fertility rates dropping below replacement levels. Only three per cent of the world's population now live in countries that have not experienced fertility decline (Morgan & Taylor, 2006). Since 1960, period total fertility rates in advanced industrialized societies have declined precipitously; from 2.88 children per woman in the age group 15 - 44 in the 1960s to 1.87 children in the 1980s (Sardon & Robertson, 2002). The process of decline continued after the 1980s, but at a much slower pace and with more variability (Castles, 2003), with an estimated average of 1.50 children per woman in 2010 (UN, 2009).

In discussions on fertility decline, most social scientists and demographers focus on the timing of children and the number of children women bear. A key question in the current demography debate is whether aggregate fertility change reflects fertility postponement (*tempo*) or a change in the number of births women will have (*quantum*), a debate in which proponents of timing shifts seem to have the upper hand (Billari & Kohler, 2004; Sobotka, 2004). In such discussions on fertility decline, childlessness is often neglected. An often made assumption is that low levels of fertility correspond with high levels of childlessness. However, it is too simple to equate low fertility with high levels of childlessness. Cross-national comparative analyses reveal discrepancies between total fertility rates and levels of childlessness in different countries (Billari, 2005). Spain, for example, has one of the lowest total fertility rates in Europe (between 1.2 and 1.3) and a relatively low rate of childlessness (10.5% in the 1960 birth cohort). Germany also has a low fertility rate, but the rate of childlessness is relatively high (21.5% in the 1960 birth cohort). The Netherlands has a moderate total fertility rate (1.7), and a rate of childlessness of 17.7% for the 1960 birth cohort. These findings suggest that childlessness deserves separate attention in the fertility debate.

In micro-level fertility studies, childlessness tends to be neglected as well. Studies usually start from the point of view of the family cycle, focusing on those individuals who have children. As a result, individuals who never make the transition to parenthood tend to be overlooked (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007b). This dissertation aims to make people who are childless in the Netherlands today visible. Though the numbers of childless men and women in the population are relatively large – one in every five individuals in the Netherlands remain childless – little scientific research has been done on this group, apart from a set of studies conducted in the 1970s and 1980s (Bandt van den, 1982; Niphuis-Nell, 1977; Veenhoven & van der Wolk, 1977). The research question addressed in this study is: *What are the causes and consequences of*

*childlessness?* Answering this question is a first step in understanding the role childlessness plays in the lives of today's Dutch.

## **1.2 Theories on fertility**

Many social scientists have made efforts to explain contemporary levels of fertility. For a scheme and overview of theories, see Morgan and Taylor (2006). Many of these theories are characterized by a focus on one specific explanatory factor, but Goode's classic work (Goode, 1963) is an early example of combining economic, ideological and technological factors.

Most theories focus on economic developments as the drivers of the process of social change that undermined incentives for childbearing. Different economic factors have been put forward, a key factor being the increased educational and career opportunities of women from the 1960s. Many women postponed having children because of the opportunity costs of foregoing labor market opportunities. Furthermore, it was difficult to reconcile modern urban-industrial society with a kin-based society in which most household chores and the upbringing of children remained the primary responsibility of women. For many women, work and familial obligations were not easy to combine. Other economic theories focus on labor market deregulation, such as flexibility and short-term contracts and the insecurities this brings along. Investment in human capital is seen as an essential hedge against these risks. As a result, family formation is put on hold while human capital is accumulated. There are also economic theories that focus on the decreasing instrumental value of children. The necessity to have many children, which mostly had an economic or practical rationale (Bulatao, 1981), was reduced as families became wealthier, decreasing the likelihood that women would give birth to more than two children.

Another type of theory focuses on ideological change. Although these theories borrow from economic globalization, the most fundamental change seen in them is a shift in the interpretative frame through which the world is viewed. Low fertility was motivated by new ideas that emphasized the individual and individual choice (Van de Kaa, 1994). Values shifted towards individualization and personal self-fulfillment. Increased individual aspirations strengthened career orientations, especially among women. In the absence of clear normative values, individuals themselves needed to construct meaning in their lives. The idea gained popularity that people were 'captains of their own biographies', capable of shaping the directions their lives were taking (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). This also affected the way in which people looked upon parenthood. Rather than a common expected goal, the decision to have children, or additional children, became a matter of preference, the result of a careful weighing of the

advantages and disadvantages of parenthood, and a derivative of a personal quest for self-realization (Van de Kaa, 2003). As a result, some individuals decided to forego having children to pursue academic aspirations or because they did not want to cut back their personal or couple leisure time.

A third set of theories focuses on the impact of technological change, although this effect is often discussed in relation to the above-mentioned changes. Most theories focus on contraceptive technology. With the introduction of modern contraceptives, women gained control over reproduction and childbearing decisions. For the first time in history, women were able to accurately control their fertility. Parenthood became a choice rather than a purely biological phenomenon (Hakim, 2003). Being able to postpone having children, women could invest in education without having to resort to abstinence or postponement of unions, as women had done before the introduction of the pill (Goldin & Katz, 2000). As a result, the pill increased the age at which women had their first child.

In sum, the above-mentioned theories explain why women postpone children and why they have fewer children, on average, than women in previous decades. With the exception of Morgan (1991) and Sobotka (2004), little attention has been paid to explaining and understanding childlessness.

### **1.3 Relevance of studying childlessness**

#### *1.3.1 Societal relevance*

Childlessness is worth examining for both societal and scientific reasons. The study of childlessness has societal relevance for two reasons. First, the study of childlessness is important because of the large proportion of the Dutch population that will face childlessness, either themselves or people in their surroundings. Recent estimates suggest that one in every five individuals in the Netherlands will never have children (De Graaf & Van Duin, 2007). Given these large percentages, there is surprisingly little knowledge on childless individuals. Who are they and how does remaining childless affect their life outcomes?

Second, childlessness and, more in general, low fertility have important effects on society in the long run, as expressed by concerns about an ageing population and how this may pose a threat to the viability of current welfare systems in many European countries (Commission of the European Communities, 2005). Policy measures have therefore been designed to encourage childbearing. Scholars have recently argued that current policy measures to enhance childbearing primarily affect the timing of having children rather than the question *whether* people have children (De Graaf & van Duin, 2007; Frejka, Sobotka, Hoem, & Toulemon, 2008). This implies that current policies may only advance childbearing among those who intend to have children in the first place. It is estimated

that, depending on their age, only up to eight per cent of women who postpone childbearing actually end up childless (Jong & Steenhof, 2000). Individuals who remain permanently childless differ from individuals who postpone childbearing in terms of their background characteristics and life courses (Heaton, Jacobson, & Holland, 1999). A clear understanding of the characteristics of childless individuals has societal relevance for it would help policy makers reach the group of individuals who might otherwise end up without children.

### *1.3.2 Scientific relevance*

Two reasons can be given for studying childlessness from a scientific point of view. The first concerns the changed characteristics of childless individuals over time. Contemporary childless individuals are likely to be different from childless individuals from older cohorts. The second reason focuses on the extent to which the study of childlessness can shed light on the three major questions addressed by sociology: modernization, inequality and social cohesion.

*Differences in the characteristics of childless individuals.* Studies of childlessness in the Netherlands date back to the 1970s and 1980s. Dynamic changes in fertility, family patterns and living arrangements have taken place since then. And although contemporary childless women show similarities with those from earlier cohorts with respect to characteristics such as them being highly educated, non-religious and living in urban areas (Dykstra, 2009), the contemporary childless are likely to differ substantially from childless individuals from older cohorts. Furthermore, just as the trajectories leading to permanent childlessness may have changed, the consequences of remaining childless may also have undergone changes. These insights require new and up-to-date analyses of the pathways into and life outcomes of contemporary childlessness.

*Broader sociological questions.* The study of childlessness is also scientifically relevant because it may help shed light on the three broader questions of modernization, inequality and social cohesion which sociology has studied from time immemorial (Engbersen & De Haan, 2006). Family life has changed along with processes of modernization. Scholars argue that modernization has led to more freedom of choice (Ultee, Arts & Flap, 1992). The introduction of contraceptives gave women control over their childbearing behavior, enabling them to plan their pregnancies or forego having children completely. The pill also enabled women to prioritize other life pursuits, mainly with respect to their occupational careers, and to avoid opportunity costs (Goldin & Katz, 2000). Finally, modern contraceptives made it easier for people to be sexually active without having to commit to a long-lasting relationship. In Sobotka's (2004) words, 'Parenthood has become a matter of choice, of mutual agreement between partners about being ready for having children given their current and expected circumstances and

conflicting goals' (p.36). But to what extent are people truly free in their childbearing choices? Individuals are not always able to foresee the short- and long-term consequences of their decisions and actions. Furthermore, events, such as relationship break-ups or unemployment may simply happen to people. Focusing on the antecedents of contemporary childlessness will help to shed some light on the balance between individual choice and restrictions in realizing childbearing outcomes.

A general question in the family-sociology literature is the extent to which and the way in which family structure contributes to social inequality (Dykstra, 2006a). One strand of research has focused on the impact of family structure on the well-being of children; see for example (Lansford, Ceballo, Abbey, & Stewart, 2001). Other studies have focused on the way in which partnership status strengthens or weakens inequality (Smock, 2004; Waite & Gallagher, 2000; Wu & Hart, 2002). It is much less common for parental status to be considered a dimension of inequality. This status is often used purely as a socio-demographic variable that differentiates people and is used in research as a control variable rather than a characteristic of analytic interest. However, parental status may be a strong indicator of inequality. We know from the literature that having children negatively affects the income of women, a phenomenon known as the 'motherhood penalty' (Budig & England, 2001). In the area of health, by contrast, parenthood may be a protective factor, as scholars have argued that the presence of children makes parents avoid health-damaging behavior (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Umberson, 1987). Thus, a focus on the impact of childlessness may help answer the question whether parental status creates important divisions in society with respect to income and health.

The study of contemporary childless men and women may also shed light on the extent to which and the way in which family structures contribute to cohesion in society. Social cohesion can be defined as social integration and embedment when people's lives are tied to the lives of others in personally meaningful ways (Dykstra, 2006b). Parenthood may facilitate the creation of new ties, as parents often make new acquaintances through their children: in the neighborhood, through playmates, and via school. Furthermore, adults with children are also more likely to invest in community improvement because it increases the life chances for their children (Eggebeen & Uhlenberg, 1985). Paradoxically, focusing on the childless provides a better understanding of the socially integrating functions parenthood serves. Therefore, by examining the impact of childlessness, I hope to shed light on the extent to which childless individuals have weaker ties with society compared with people who have children.

## 1.4 Research objectives

The objective of this dissertation is twofold. First, I aim to find out which life trajectories lead people to a childless state. In the past, scholars started from the notion that individuals either decided at an early stage that they wanted to remain childless or that they ended up childless because of infertility or sub-fecundity. To unravel how people ended up childless, scholars made a distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness (Houseknecht, 1987; Matthews & Martin-Matthews, 1986; Van Balen, 1991; Veevers, 1983). Such a dichotomized subjective distinction may be useful for understanding how childlessness impacts people's feelings and behaviors in later life, as others have also indicated (Connidis & McMullin, 1996). In my view, in contemporary developed countries, this distinction has become less informative for understanding how people came to childlessness, as I will elaborate in the following.

The context of contemporary childlessness raises difficulties of framing childlessness in terms of choice, as others have also noted (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995; Letherby, 2002; S. Morgan, 1991; Toulemon, 1996). First, the criteria are quite ambiguous. How to label individuals whose career orientation made them postpone decisions concerning children to a point when they were no longer biologically capable of having children? What to think of individuals who abstained from having children because of relationship break-ups at childbearing ages? Are these couples involuntarily childless because they had a reduced chance of having children? Are they voluntarily childless because they postponed having children? Second, the criteria for being voluntarily or involuntarily childless are somewhat inadequate. In reality, many people remain childless without having explicitly pondered the decision whether or not to become a parent (Toulemon, 1996). For example, they may simply have grown accustomed to a lifestyle they did not want to give up in favor of having a child. For that reason, scholars have stressed that it is more appropriate to speak of "remaining childless" rather than choosing childlessness (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Letherby, 2002). I therefore pose that it is better to speak of differential pathways that lead to permanent childlessness. This underscores the importance of moving away from dichotomized thinking. In comparing the pathways into childlessness with those into parenthood, I hope to identify who the childless are, which is the first objective of this dissertation.

The second objective is to find out what consequences childlessness has for people's life outcomes. Information on the diversity among the pathways of the childless will help show what the life outcomes of contemporary childless individuals are. The rationale is that remaining childless affects people's lives differently, depending on how they came to childlessness (Dykstra, 2004; Dykstra & Wagner, 2007). For example, differences in people's partnership histories are likely to lead to variations in the ramifications of

remaining childless. Cross-national studies reveal that the life outcomes of never-married childless women are much more favorable than those of their married counterparts. For men, the opposite patterns are most commonly found (Koropecj-Cox & Call, 2007). Whereas never-married men are more likely to have been excluded from marriage because of health problems and poor economic prospects, never-married women are more often found to be self-reliant women with alternative opportunities outside marriage (Bernard, 1972; Rowland, 1998). These examples stress the importance of examining the impact of childlessness while taking into account people's life courses.

### **1.5 Theoretical approach: Life course perspective**

In this dissertation the life course perspective is used to study the pathways into and the outcomes of a childless life. I have shown that theories on low fertility differ in the factors they bring forward as driving the fertility transition, focusing either on economic, ideological or technological change. In the lives of real individuals, social, economic, cultural, psychological and biological processes are likely to be at work simultaneously. In the words of Morgan and Taylor (2006), 'we must move beyond debates of economic change versus ideology or structure versus culture to new formulations that do justice to the dynamics of social change' (p.395). To explain fertility behavior, and more specifically to explain and understand childlessness, a well-grounded interdisciplinary perspective is needed that takes into account the various contexts affecting the paths of people's lives. I believe the life course perspective offers this.

In the life course perspective, individual behavior is viewed as being embedded in dynamic, interdependent contexts (Elder, Jr., 1995). Although the life course perspective is often applied to grasp the interplay between micro and macro levels, in this dissertation I draw primarily on two life course notions that focus on individual-level interdependencies to understand why people remain childless and what the consequences of a childless life are. Firstly, the life course perspective argues that decisions concerning major life course events are shaped by an individual's past experiences, a process labeled 'cumulative contingencies' (Dannefer, 2003; Heinz, 1997; O'Rand, 1996). This notion emphasizes the use of life histories to make sense of the causes of childlessness. How long individuals were in education, whether and when people entered work, became partnered, or ended a partnership may be very useful for understanding why people remained childless. The timing and stability of partnerships are particularly crucial for women. Late marriages or disrupted marital careers before the birth of the first child may result in women missing what is called opportunity deadlines (Hagestad & Call, 2007).

Secondly, the life course perspective emphasizes that decision making on important life course transitions is strongly influenced by the interplay between various parallel

careers, a notion known as ‘path interdependencies’ (Elder, 1994; Willekens, 1991). This notion emphasizes that in order to understand the impact of remaining childless, circumstances and behavior in various domains, such as marriage and occupation, should be taken into account. For example, whether or not people have, or had a partner may make a substantial difference in terms of how people experience the impact of childlessness.

## **1.6 Research questions**

In this dissertation, I link four research questions to the three broad sociological questions of modernization, inequality and social cohesion. My first research question is framed around the issue of modernization and examines which behaviors and circumstances lead to a childless life. My second research question is framed around social cohesion and focuses on differences in familial responsibilities between childless individuals and parents. My third and fourth research questions both address the issue of inequality. Whereas the former asks whether parenthood is a marker of inequality for feelings of well-being among men and women, the latter investigates the life outcomes of childless men.

### *1.6.1 Pathways into childlessness*

My first research question is framed around the issue of modernization. Modernization is thought to be reflected in the notion that people these days are seen as ‘captains of their own biographies’, capable of shaping the directions their lives are taking (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). However, as mentioned, in modern societies it is difficult to frame childlessness in terms of choice. Reality is more complex than the dichotomy between voluntary and involuntary childlessness suggests. Studies reveal a discrepancy between childbearing intentions and actual childbearing outcomes. The percentage of individuals who say from the outset that they do not plan to have children is much lower than the percentage that actually end up childless (De Graaf & Steenhof, 1999; Rovi, 1994; Toulemon, 1996). This suggests that circumstances and behavior during the life course alter people’s life paths, which underlines the importance of the notions of cumulative contingencies (over time) and path interdependencies (across domains). Indeed, several authors have suggested that people make choices about delaying union formation and focusing on their educational and occupational careers and then end up childless, rather than explicitly opting for childlessness (De Meester, Esveldt, Mulder, & Beets, 2005; DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Gerson, 1985; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Morgan, 1991; Morgan, 1982; Toulemon, 1996). Therefore, from a life course perspective, I examine the antecedents of childlessness by focusing on pathways leading

to a childless life. I shift away from the idea that childlessness is the outcome of a single decision not to have children. Instead, I consider remaining childless to be the outcome of a dynamic process in which cumulative contingencies and path dependencies play a key role.

The notions of cumulative contingencies and path interdependencies also shed light on gender differences in pathways into childlessness. For example, women experience stronger interdependencies between family life and work than men do. Women also have biological deadlines for childbearing which men do not have. This is referred to above as opportunity deadlines. These notions underscore that being male or female shapes the nature, organization and patterning of transitions and life course trajectories (Moen, 1996). It is therefore likely that different processes underlie the pathways into childlessness for men and women. These considerations lead to the following research question:

*(1) Which (educational, occupational and marital) pathways increase the likelihood of remaining childless and are these pathways different for women and men?*

#### *1.6.2 Childlessness and social cohesion*

My second research question addresses the issue of social cohesion. With changing family types and the increase in the number of childless couples in society during the last decades, scholars have expressed concern about decreasing cohesion in society and, closer to home, feelings of solidarity within families (Bloom & Bennett, 1986; Hunt & Hunt, 1982; Komter & Vollebergh, 2002). Here, I look into the question of cohesion in terms of familial responsibility. The childless are often stereotyped as somewhat 'individualistic' people who avoid social responsibility and are less prepared to commit themselves to helping others in society (Kopper & Smith, 2001; LaMastro, 2001; Letherby, 2002; Mueller & Yoder, 1999). If these stereotypes reflect reality, a divide could arise between people with and without children. Despite the societal relevance of this question, little scientific research has addressed whether contemporary childless individuals are different from those with children in terms of their feelings of responsibility. My specific focus here is on familial responsibility. Are childless men and women less social family members compared with parents, as is often assumed?

The literature shows that in answering this question, the childless should not be lumped together. Scholars assume that only childless individuals who, at an early stage in their lives, say they want to remain childless tend to prefer friends over family members in their social circles. This suggests that people are selected into childlessness. Selection is also evident among women who remained childless before the 1940s; these women were, however, often most dedicated towards their families. They had remained unmarried and therefore also childless because they had to stay at home to take care of

sick relatives. These notions suggest that people's feelings of familial responsibility are not so much transformed by parenthood, a process referred to as adaptation, but rather that feelings of familial responsibility select people into childlessness. It is important to note that these two research findings contradict each other in terms of the impact parental status might have on familial responsibility. Whereas the former suggest that (voluntarily) childless individuals have a weaker sense of familial responsibility, the latter suggests the opposite. These considerations lead to the following research question:

*(2) Do contemporary childless individuals have weaker or stronger feelings of familial responsibility in comparison with parents? And do processes of selection or adaptation underlie these findings?*

### *1.6.3 Childlessness and social inequality*

My third research question is framed around the issue of inequality. Parenthood is often argued to lead to inequalities in people's life courses (Hagestad & Call, 2007). Scholars have shown that these inequalities are reflected in the behavior of people who have children; parents are more socially integrated, avoid health-damaging behaviors and report to be in better physical condition than their childless counterparts (Dykstra, 2006b; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Umberson, 1987). As described, this suggests that social inequality may emerge with respect to social integration and health between people with and those without children. Inequality may also arise in the area of well-being, but the literature has not yet come up with conclusive evidence that either of these two statuses is beneficial for well-being. Two different pictures are presented. One rosy view in which parenthood makes life fulfilling and gives it a deeper meaning, and one in which the more gloomy sides of parenthood are painted; parenthood often entails a reduction in personal and couple leisure time, which negatively influences the well-being of parents (see for a review Demo & Cox, 2000).

A focus on parenthood in isolation of behavior and people's circumstances in other life domains, such as the occupational domain, is characteristic of previous research. Drawing on the notion of path interdependencies, the life course perspective emphasizes the importance of taking into account behavior in parallel careers in order to make sense of the consequences of this behavior. Transitions in one life area, in this case the domain of family life, should always be studied in conjunction with other life areas. The birth of a first child usually goes hand in hand with a change in working hours, and transitions in the marital domain tend to occur in the same period as the transition to parenthood. Such transitions, rather than parenthood itself, may lie at the base of changed feelings of well-being. Transitions in these parallel careers should therefore be taken into account when

trying to fathom the impact on parenthood on well-being. The following research question is addressed:

(3) *To what extent does the transition to parenthood affect feelings of well-being?*

#### *1.6.4 A focus on middle-aged childless men*

My fourth and final question, like my third research question, addresses the issue of inequality. Here, the focus is specifically on men. Most studies on childlessness focus on women. We know from the literature that never-married childless women have characteristics that make it likely that they will have a happy, financially stable and socially active later life: they tend to be highly educated, have had a continuous occupational career and have a strong and close social network (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007). In contrast to the literature on women, we hardly know anything about the life outcomes of childless men (see, however, Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; and Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006 for excellent exceptions). The outcomes for childless men are likely to be less positive. Childless men tend to have a low level of education, a greater likelihood of being unemployed and are less likely to be partnered. Does this imply that childless men are disadvantaged in the long run? Do they have lower levels of income, are they less involved with the community, are they less healthy? And more generally: is parental status an important marker of inequality for men? This leads to the following research question:

(4) *How well do middle-aged childless men fare in the long run in comparison with fathers?*

## **1.7 Innovation**

This study is innovative in both a theoretical and methodological sense. The application of a life course perspective gives rise to two theoretical advances and my research design and measurements lead to three methodological advances. I will address them below.

### *1.7.1 Theoretical innovation*

*Studying pathways.* Many studies that focus on the antecedents or consequences of childlessness focus solely on current circumstances (Heaton *et al.*, 1999; Schoen *et al.*, 1999; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; De Meester *et al.*, 2005). From the life course perspective, however, the current childless state is seen as the result of past behavior and circumstances. Focusing only on current statuses may then obscure important past events (Kiernan, 2004). For example, knowing whether a woman has a partner at any one point in time may be less useful for understanding childlessness than knowing the duration and patterning of her marital history throughout adulthood. In this book, I make use of

people's life histories in order to grasp which behavioral pathways lead to childlessness and what the implications of a childless life are.

*Disentangling partner and parental status.* Few studies have considered the interdependencies between the marital and parental domains when studying the pathways and life outcomes of childless individuals. The literature shows that people who have a partner, in particular those who are married, are most likely to enter parenthood (Barber, 2001; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Parr, 2005; Schoen, Astone, Kim, Nathanson, & Fields, 1999; Schoen, Kim, Nathanson, Fields, & Astone, 1997). It is not known whether differences between individuals with and without children are attributable to being unpartnered or to being childless. Few scholars have studied the effects of childlessness in conjunction with partner status. This book takes into account partner status when analyzing the consequences of leading a childless life. In doing so, I will be able to disentangle the effects of partner status and parental status on people's life outcomes.

### *1.7.2 Methodological innovation*

*The inclusion of men.* Previous work on childlessness has focused primarily on women and has neglected men (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2003; Forste, 2002; Greene & Biddlecom, 2000). There are two reasons why there is little information on childless men. First, few data are available on men's fertility behavior and childlessness (Dykstra, 2009). Childbearing decisions were thought to be taken primarily by women, men merely being of economic importance in these decisions (Greene & Biddlecom, 2000). Scholars also questioned the reliability of information about men's fertility behavior, as men's reproductive spans are not as clearly defined as those of women and as women can provide information about their fertility with much greater accuracy than men. Second, scholars have tended to focus only on women because the ramifications of not having entered the parental role are generally assumed to be greater for childless women than for childless men. The idea underlying this assumption is that being a parent is considered to be more central to the lives of women than to those of men (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2003; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Veivers, 1980). I question this latter assumption: whereas the context surrounding childrearing may be different for women and men, this does not necessarily imply that parenthood has less impact on the lives of men. Therefore, I will dedicate considerable attention to men with respect to the pathways into, and the life outcomes of a childless life. In this book, the pathways into childlessness (Chapter 2), the extent to which childless individuals feel responsible for their families (Chapter 3) and the impact of entering parenthood on people's feelings of well-being (Chapter 4) are studied for both women and men. Chapter 5 focuses on the long-term consequences of childlessness for men only.

*Defining childlessness.* Few scholars have considered childlessness in the context of people's life course stages. In the literature about the transition to parenthood, researchers place young individuals who may still make the transition to parenthood in the childless category. So, in these research designs, no distinction is made between permanently childless individuals and people who are 'not yet parents' (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Umberson & Gove, 1989). Others have reduced parenthood to having children living in the parental home, which obscures the distinction between the childless and empty-nest parents (for reviews of this problem, see Kendig, Dykstra, Gaalen, & Melkas, 2007; McLanahan & Adams, 1987). As a result, no distinction is made between life-long childlessness and no longer having children living at home. Finally, differences between never having had children and outliving one's children also tend to be glossed over (and erroneously so, see Dykstra & Liefbroer, 1998). Most studies simply compare individuals with and those without living children. In this book, I make use of precise definitions of childlessness and distinguish between different types of childlessness.

*Diversity of life outcomes.* I start from the assumption that the implications of childlessness may vary across life domains. For example, remaining childless may have a strong impact on people's health behavior, but it may have little influence on the amount of time people spend with their relatives. A finding in one area of life is thus not necessarily applicable to other areas. A narrow scope of outcomes limits the possibility to obtain a well-rounded view of the implications of childlessness. So while childlessness may have particular advantages in some domains of life, it may well have drawbacks in others. This dissertation sheds light on a diverse set of life outcomes of childlessness. Chapter 3 focuses on familial responsibility, Chapter 4 on well-being and Chapter 5 on the social, economic, health and psychological outcomes of childlessness. These chapters incorporate multiple dimensions of these life domains into the analyses.

## **1.8 Data: the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study**

The data used in this dissertation come from the first two waves of the public release file of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS). The NKPS is a large-scale panel survey on family ties, which started in 2002 among a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 79 residing in private households in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2005). The data were collected by means of computer-assisted interview schedules. The interview data were supplemented with self-completion questionnaires.

Data from the first wave were collected between 2002 and 2003. The overall response rate of the first wave was 45%, which is lower than in comparable surveys in other Western countries, but similar to comparable large-scale family surveys in the

Netherlands (De Leeuw & De Heer, 2001; Dykstra et al., 2005). The second wave was conducted between 2006 and 2007. The overall response rate of the second wave was 74%. The cooperation rate for the second wave (excluding respondents who were too ill to participate and respondents who had moved abroad or died in between the waves) was 84%.

The NKPS consists of two samples: a random sample of individuals in private households in the Netherlands, and a migrant sample in collaboration with the Survey on the Social Position and Use of Welfare Provisions by Ethnic Minorities (SPVA). This book uses data from the random sample only, which was drawn from all addresses of private residents in the Netherlands. A total of 8,161 primary respondents were interviewed. The rationale for only making use of data from the random sample is that there was too little information on childlessness, life histories, and life outcomes of individuals in the migrant sample to get a grasp of ethnic differences in the pathways into and the consequences of childlessness. More extensive information gathered from a larger group of migrant respondents would have been necessary to be able to conduct reliable analyses on ethnic differences with respect to childlessness.

The NKPS offers useful data to study the antecedents of childlessness as it provides current and retrospective information on educational and labor market trajectories and on relationship and family formation histories. The data are also well suited for studying the life outcomes of remaining childless because the data provide information on several individual, relational and household characteristics of the primary respondent, such as psychological well-being, income, health and engagement in family, social and community activities. Chapters 2 and 5 make use of data from wave 1, Chapter 3 from wave 2 and Chapter 4 uses data from both waves.

## **1.9 Structure of the book**

The structure of this book follows the order of the research questions. Chapter 2 answers the first research question, investigating which pathways lead to a childless life and whether these pathways differ among women and men. Pathways in three different life domains are taken into account: the educational, occupational and marital pathways. Chapter 3 addresses the second research question and examines whether childless individuals have weaker or stronger feelings of familial responsibility compared with parents. Two types of familial responsibility are investigated: universal familial responsibility, which measures general norms of familial responsibility, and personal familial responsibility, which focuses on the degree of familial responsibility the respondents themselves display. Chapter 4 deals with the transition to parenthood and its effect on feelings of well-being, which pertains to the third research question. As the

transition to parenthood often coincides with transitions in the marital and occupational domains, transitions in partner status and working hours are incorporated in the analyses. The impact of entering parenthood on well-being is studied separately for women and men. Men are the subject of inquiry in Chapter 5. This chapter focuses on the long-term consequences of leading a childless life. Multiple outcome measures are taken into account, from social and economic to physical and psychological. Chapter 6 summarizes the main findings of this study. It also includes a discussion of the findings and implications and suggestions for future research.



# Chapter 2

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## Pathways into childlessness: Evidence of gendered life course dynamics<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> This chapter was co-authored with Prof. Dr. Pearl A. Dykstra and Dr. Miranda D. Jansen. A slightly different version of this paper is published in *Journal of Biosocial Science*, 40 (6), p. 863-878. An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the American Sociological Association conference, August 2007, New York.



## 2.1 Introduction

The last decades have witnessed the emergence in life course theorizing of the do-it-yourself-biography, which assumes that people have ample possibilities to shape the direction of their lives (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Giddens, 1991). This agentic point of view on the life course is reflected in the emphasis that is placed on *choice* in going through demographic transitions, such as the entry into parenthood. The emphasis in the fertility research literature on voluntary versus involuntary childlessness is exemplary for the agentic perspective on the life course (Abma & Martinez, 2006; De Meester et al., 2005; Rovi, 1994).

Researchers have pointed to the difficulties of framing childlessness in terms of choice (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Hobcraft & Kiernan, 1995; Letherby, 2002; Morgan, 1991; Toulemon, 1996). Issues of choice are obviously irrelevant to those who are biologically unable to conceive. Only a small group of individuals expresses at an early age that they do not intend to have children, the so called “early deciders” (Houseknecht, 1987; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Veevers, 1980). A larger group ends up childless without having explicitly pondered the decision whether or not to become a parent (Toulemon, 1996). For that reason it is more appropriate to speak of “remaining childless” than choosing childlessness (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Letherby, 2002). The perspective we adopt here is that remaining childless is not the outcome of a single decision not to have children, but rather the outcome of never having made the decision to actually have children. Several authors have suggested that rather than explicitly choosing childlessness, people make choices about delaying marriage and focusing on educational and occupational careers, and then end up childless (De Meester et al., 2005; DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Gerson, 1985; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Morgan, 1991; Morgan, 1982; Toulemon, 1996). In line with the previous considerations, we suggest that a focus on life pathways is helpful to understand why people remain childless.

Two life course principles inform our thinking about remaining childless. The first is that of “cumulative contingencies”: Previous experiences shape ensuing behavior (Dannefer, 2003; Heinz, 1997; O’Rand, 1996). The second is that of “interdependencies” between pathways: Behavior in one pathway shapes behavior in another (Elder, 1994; Willekens, 1991). Both principles imply that successive steps in life, increase (or decrease) the likelihood of remaining childless.

Being male or female shapes the nature, organization and patterning of roles, resources, relationships and identities throughout life (Moen, 1996). Moreover, gender sets the context of lives, reflecting not only physiological differences, but also unique structural circumstances. For example, in our society, the gender-based division of tasks leads to greater restrictions on combining work and childcare responsibilities for women than men

(Hakim, 2003; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Schippers, 2003; Wetzels, 2001) . Previous studies have rarely considered the gendered life course processes through which people remain childless: Women were the primary focus in childlessness research, and men were largely neglected (Forste, 2002; Greene & Biddlecom, 2000). We therefore argue that it is important to separately examine the pathways of women and men to understand the recruitment into childlessness.

In summary, our work makes two contributions to existing studies. First, we aim to explain childlessness by focusing on behavioral pathways leading to childlessness rather than considering contemporary correlates of childlessness or preferences for a childless lifestyle. Second, we include both women and men in our research design, which enables us to examine gendered pathways into childlessness. Our analyses are based on data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), a nationally representative survey conducted in 2002-2004, from which we selected 5062 persons (2867 women and 2195 men) between the ages of 40 and 79.

## **2.2 Pathways into childlessness**

We draw, as much as possible, upon existing theoretical arguments to explain why people with different educational, occupational and marital backgrounds have different likelihoods of remaining childless. Nevertheless, we also extend previous explanations. By focusing on behavioral pathways, we transcend previous studies that focus solely on current behavior in order to explain childlessness (De Meester et al., 2005; Heaton et al., 1999; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Schoen et al., 1999). Since pathways pertain to experiences across the life course, using only current statuses may obscure important past events (Kiernan, 2004). For example, knowing whether a woman has a partner at any one point in time may be less useful for understanding childlessness than knowing the duration and patterning of her marital history throughout adulthood. Thus, our pathway perspective inspires us to look at how people came to be recruited into the childless state (Hagestad, 2007).

*Educational pathway.* For women, the positive relationship between education and childlessness is well documented both in the Netherlands (De Meester et al., 2005; Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2000) and in other Western countries (Bloom & Trussell, 1984; Feldman, 1981; González & Jurado-Guerrero, 2006; Heaton et al., 1999; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; McAllister & Clarke, 1998). For men, however, results are less straight forward. Some researchers find positive (Ritchey & Stokes, 1974), others negative (Feldman, 1981; Heaton et al., 1999), and one Dutch study reports no impact of education on childlessness for men (De Meester et al., 2005).

The literature presents opposing views on the way in which education shapes the likelihood of remaining childless. One view is that the better educated are less likely to make the transition to parenthood than those with lower levels of education. Given that being enrolled in education is perceived to be incompatible with family formation (Blossfeld & Huinink, 1991; Rindfuss, Morgan, & Swicegood, 1988; Sobotka, 2004), people with higher levels of education are more likely to postpone and eventually cancel the idea of having children. Moreover, through education, people are exposed to value orientations representing a wide range of life styles. It has been argued that a high level of education is related to roles and value systems more strongly directed towards the occupational career than towards parenting, and particularly so among women (De Jong & Sell, 1977; Heaton et al., 1999). The opposing view is that higher levels of education increase the likelihood of making the transition to parenthood (Heaton et al., 1999). For both women and men, higher levels of education and the associated career prospects make it easier to support a family.

Our reading of the literature is that educational attainment serves as a restriction on women's entry into parenthood, given a stronger orientation towards a working career and the difficulties of combining job and parenting responsibilities. Therefore, we hypothesize that educational attainment increases the likelihood that women remain childless. Higher levels of education might both encourage and discourage men from having children. We therefore refrain from formulating a hypothesis, and will explore the link between men's education and the likelihood of remaining childless.

*Employment pathway.* Research has consistently shown that working women (De Jong & Sell, 1977; Heaton et al., 1999; Houseknecht, 1987; Rhee, 1973; Ritchey & Stokes, 1974; Veevers, 1979) and women in high status jobs (Bloom & Pebley, 1982; Callan, 1986; De Jong & Sell, 1977; Friedman, Hechter, & Kanazawa, 1994) are more likely to remain childless than their female counterparts. Associations between employment and childlessness are less well documented for men. Common to studies in this area is that only current job characteristics are used as indicators of childbearing behavior. We focus on (dis)continuity in the occupational career to capture (in)security of job prospects.

As was the case for educational attainment, opposing predictions can be derived regarding the impact of continuity of employment on the likelihood of remaining childless. Discontinuity implies having experienced a period of unemployment. On the one hand, continuity of employment might decrease the likelihood of remaining childless. Those who have been employed continuously are more likely to have had a stable flow of income and are therefore better able to support a family (Heaton et al., 1999). On the other hand, employment continuity might be associated with value orientations that increase the likelihood of remaining childless. The greater the continuity and the more

constant the flow of income, the more likely it is that a lifestyle is developed that is perceived to be incompatible with having children (De Jong & Sell, 1977). People may be so attached to this lifestyle that they are not willing to give it up to start a family (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002).

The reasoning underlying the employment pathway hypotheses is similar to that for educational attainment. The combination of having children and being employed is more difficult for women than men, given the gender-based division of tasks in society. Therefore, we expect that women with continuity of employment are more likely to remain childless than women who have experienced career breaks. Financial considerations suggest a negative impact of discontinuity of employment on men's likelihood of remaining childless, whereas life style considerations suggest the opposite. We therefore refrain from formulating a hypothesis, and will explore the link between discontinuity in men's employment careers and childlessness.

*Marital pathway.* Numerous studies have shown that childlessness rates are higher among the unmarried than among the married (Barber, 2001; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Parr, 2005; Schoen et al., 1999; Schoen et al., 1997). Common to studies in this area is that only current characteristics are taken into account. We focus on marital pathway characteristics to capture the full dynamics of people's marital history.

During the last decade, the link between marriage and childbearing has increasingly weakened. Non-marital childbearing has risen drastically, both as a consequence of the greater number of years young adults spend unmarried, and of increased birth rates among unmarried women (Kiernan, 2004; Smith, Morgan, & Koropeckyj-Cox, 1996; Smock, 2000; US Census Bureau, 2004). The rise in the rates of unmarried childbearing suggests that people perceive the absence of a partner as less of an obstacle to childbearing now than in the past. However, most unmarried childbearing still occurs within a union (Bumpass & Lu, 1999; Kiernan, 2004; Smock, 2000). Moreover, the practical considerations of caring for children are most easily resolved within a partnership. For these reasons, we hypothesize that people who have never had a partner are more likely to remain childless compared to people who ever had a partner.

Prior research on the fertility of married and cohabiting couples indicates that childbearing is still more common in legal marriages than in cohabiting unions (Manning, 1995; Smock, 2000). Some have argued that because unmarried cohabitation is less institutionalized than marriage, there are no strong normative expectations that cohabiters should become parents (Beets, Liefbroer, & Gierveld, 1999). Others have posed that cohabitation is selective of individuals who are less committed to marriage and parenthood (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990; Smock, 2000). Fertility desires may be the most crucial difference between cohabiters and married

couples (Bachrach, 1987). For the above reasons, we hypothesize that people who have ever married are less likely to remain childless compared to people who have ever cohabited, but never married.

Besides increases in the occurrence of non-marital childbearing, the timing of childbearing has changed over the past decades, with people entering their first relationship at later ages (CBS, 2005, 2006; Liefbroer, 1999; Sardon & Robertson, 2002; US-Census-Bureau, 2003). The literature presents opposing views on the way in which delayed entry into first union shapes the likelihood of remaining childless. One view is that it indicates the postponement and possible renunciation of having children. People who enter their first relationship at a later age might be a selective group of individuals who do not want to commit themselves to a relationship and children. Moreover, if people marry or find a partner too late, they may miss critical opportunity deadlines, both due to biological constraints and a shrinking pool of potential partners (Hagestad & Call, 2007). Biology presents women with non-negotiable deadlines, through permanent loss of fecundity (Frank, Bianchi, & Campana, 1994; Te Velde & Pearson, 2002). Given that men do not have biological restrictions and more often find partners who are younger than they are, they are able to “catch up” the years in which they did not have a partner. The opposing view is that an older age at the start of one’s first relationship decreases the likelihood of remaining childless, as people who want children, do not want to further delay having them. This is particularly so for women, whose biological clocks are ticking more loudly with increasing age than men’s.

In summary, a late entry into the first relationship might both encourage and discourage individuals from having children. We therefore refrain from formulating a hypothesis, and will explore the linkage between a late entry into the first relationship and the likelihood of remaining childless. Irrespective of the direction, findings suggest that the linkage between a late entry into the first relationship and childlessness is stronger among women than among men.

Higher divorce rates (CBS, 2006; Latten & Kreijen, 2001; Sardon & Robertson, 2002; US Census Bureau, 2003), also result in a greater number of years spent without a partner. Women, in particular, may miss deadlines for having children. Moreover, those who spend many years without a partner may develop a lifestyle that is perceived to be incompatible with starting a family. For these reasons, we hypothesize that more years without a partner increase the likelihood of remaining childless, and particularly so among women.

Finally, people are remarrying and repartnering more often than in the decennia before, leading to complex marital histories (Dykstra, 2004; Latten & Kreijen, 2001; Liefbroer, 1999; Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2000; Sardon & Robertson, 2002; US Census Bureau, 2003).

Studies at the micro level on linkages between discontinuous marital careers and childlessness are rare.

The literature presents opposing views on the way in which having multiple relationships shapes the likelihood of remaining childless. One view is that individuals with a discontinuous marital career are less likely to make the transition to parenthood, because they are a selective group who do not want to commit themselves to a relationship and children. The opposing view is that a discontinuous marital career creates new opportunities for having children. When the first relationship did not yield a child, starting a new relationship may generate new opportunities to have a child (Latten & Kreijen, 2001). Thus, commitment considerations suggest a positive impact of a discontinuous marital career on the likelihood of remaining childless, whereas opportunity considerations suggest the opposite. We therefore refrain from formulating a hypothesis, and will explore the linkage between discontinuity in people’s marital career and childlessness.

Given the aforementioned demographic changes, current marital status may have become less helpful for explaining childlessness. We therefore expect that our marital pathway characteristics help to explain childlessness beyond the explanation current partner status yields. Table 2.1 provides a summary of the hypotheses.

**Table 2.1** Expected effects on the likelihood of being childless, by gender

	Women	Men
Educational attainment	+	?
Uninterrupted occupational career	+	?
Ever married	-	-
Age at start first union	?	?
Years without partner in fertile years	++	+
No unions in fertile years	+	+
Multiple unions in fertile years	?	?

## 2.3 Method

### 2.3.1 Data source

Data from the public release file of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) have been used. The NKPS is a large scale panel survey on family ties, conducted between 2002 and 2004 among a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 79 residing in private households in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2005). The data were collected by means of computer assisted personal interviews supplemented with self-completion questionnaires.

The overall response rate was 45 % which is lower than in comparable surveys in the United States, but similar to comparable large-scale family surveys in the Netherlands (De Leeuw & De Heer, 2001; Dykstra et al., 2005). We used data from main respondents only, not their partners. The men and women in our study form independent samples.

For the analysis of remaining childless, we restricted the sample to women ( $n = 2884$ ) and men ( $n = 2233$ ) aged 40 up to 79 (birth cohorts 1923-1963). We chose to omit individuals under the age of 40 at the time of the interview because their childlessness status is not likely permanent. Dutch, American and Australian research have shown that the likelihood of having a first child at age 40 and over is very small (Garssen, Beer, Cuyvers, & Jong, 2001; Landry & Darroch Forrester, 1995; Parr, 2005). Analyses using NKPS data confirm this finding: The majority of fathers (97.5 %) and mothers (99.5 %) had their first child before the age of 40.

### 2.3.2 Measures

*Remaining childless.* Having no biological children at the age of 40 is our dependent variable. Those who had their first child beyond the age of 40 are excluded from the analyses (17 women and 38 men), leading to our final sample of 2867 women and 2195 men. Those who had outlived all of their children ( $n = 11$ ) were placed in the category of parents. In our final sample, 918 individuals were childless (18.1 %); 436 men (19.9 %) and 482 women (16.8 %).

*Educational attainment.* Information about education of the respondent was delineated via the question: “What is the highest level of education that you pursued?” Answers ranged from 1 = *did not complete elementary school* to 10 = *post-graduate*. Preliminary analyses (not shown) using dummy variables for each educational level showed a linear association between women’s educational attainment and childlessness, but no clear pattern for men. We included level of education as a linear variable in our model.

*Employment pathway.* The survey had only limited information on respondents’ employment pathways. Information was collected on employment status: never, currently, or previously gainfully employed. In addition, information was collected on the number and duration of periods of unemployment, but not their timing. The survey also had questions on the age at entry into the labor market, and for those who were not working at the time of the interview there was information on the age at which the labor force had been left. On the basis of this information, we constructed a dichotomous variable for the employment pathway: *continuity of employment*, that is, having no or only one-month spell of unemployment. Note that information is lacking on whether the unemployment periods occurred specifically in childbearing years. Note also that interruptions other than unemployment, such as leaving the labor market because of occupational disability or full-time homemaking, could not be identified. Finally, note that it could not be

established whether those who left the labor market before the age of 40 left the labor market permanently.

*Marital pathway.* The survey had detailed information on current marital status (never married, married, divorced, widowed), the age at which respondents first started living with their current partner, and the age at which previous marriages and unwed cohabitations started and ended.

Given our expectation that marriage has a stronger impact on the likelihood of remaining childless than unwed cohabitation, an entry into unwed cohabitation should be differentiated from an entry into a marriage. Unfortunately, however, differentiating unwed cohabitation from marriage for each partnership in the marital career led to too many careers and to too few respondents per career. We decided to only compare those who had ever cohabited but never married with those who had ever married. In the following, we speak of *unions* (partnerships in which the respondents lived together married or unmarried), and the marital career as the history of all these unions. We use the age span of 20 - 40 to indicate the fertile years. *Ever married* is a dichotomous variable indicating whether a person has ever been married between the ages of 20 - 40. *Years without a partner* is a continuous variable indicating the number of years without a partner between the ages of 20 - 40. In preliminary analyses (results not shown) the linearity of this variable was checked and confirmed. *Age at first union* is a continuous variable measured in years. People who had never cohabited or started their first union after the age of 40 were assigned score 40. *Number of unions* is a set of three dummy variables. Around 80 per cent of our respondents had one union during their fertile years; 10 percent had no union and about 10 percent had more than one union. For this reason, we made three categories: zero, one, and multiple unions between the ages of 20 - 40.

*Birth year.* We included birth year as a control variable, because childlessness rates have shown a steady increase after the Second World War (Rowland, 2007). Among Dutch women in the 1921-1930 birth cohort 17 per cent are childless, compared to 11 per cent in the 1931-1940 birth cohort, 15 percent in the 1951-1960 cohort, and an expected number of 20 percent in the 1961-1970 birth cohort (Liefbroer & Dykstra, 2000). The antecedents of childlessness have changed over time (Rowland, 2007). In the pre-1950 birth cohorts not marrying was the reason why many remained childless, whereas in more recent cohorts increasing proportions of women remained childless though they were in stable partnerships.

## 2.4 Results

### 2.4.1 Preliminary analyses

Means and standard deviations for our independent and control variables are shown in Table 2.2, separately for women and men. To find out whether the impact of having ever married is greater than that of having ever cohabited but never married, analyses on a sub-sample of ever-partnered individuals were performed. Confirming our expectations, the odds of remaining childless are significantly higher among individuals who have only ever cohabited than among ever married individuals: 7.5 times and 11.6 times higher odds for women and men respectively. We also checked whether the inclusion of marital history had explanatory power beyond current marital status. With the inclusion of years without a partner and number of partnerships, the impact of current marital status weakened, confirming our expectation that a focus on marital history helps to explain childlessness beyond the explanation current partner status yields. Given that current marital status is significantly correlated with the marital career characteristics, we did not include current marital status as a variable in our primary analyses.

**Table 2.2** Mean and standard deviations for predictors in the analysis, by gender

Variable	Mean (S.D.)		Sign. <sup>a</sup>
	Women	Men	
Educational attainment <sup>b</sup>	5.2 (2.4)	6.0 (2.5)	*
Uninterrupted occupational career (1= yes)	0.4 (0.5)	0.6 (0.5)	*
Ever married <sup>c</sup> (1= yes)	0.9 (0.3)	0.9 (0.2)	
Years without a union	4.7 (6.0)	6.5 (6.2)	*
Number of unions in fertile years			
0	0.1 (0.3)	0.1 (0.3)	
1	0.8 (0.4)	0.8 (0.4)	
>1	0.1 (0.3)	0.1 (0.3)	
Age at start first union	23.6 (3.9)	25.2 (3.6)	*
Age	23.6 (11.1)	23.9 (10.5)	
<i>N</i>	2867	2195	

Source: Netherlands Kinship Panel study, wave 1.

<sup>a</sup>The difference between women and men is significant at  $p < .001$

<sup>b</sup>Educational attainment: 1 = *did not complete elementary school*; 10 = *post-graduate*

<sup>c</sup>Analysis on a subsample of individuals who have ever been partnered.

#### *2.4.2 Primary analyses*

Next, binary logistic regressions were conducted to examine the educational, occupational and marital pathways to remaining childless for women and men separately. The results are shown in Table 2.3. Column 6 in Table 2.3 indicates whether the difference between women and men is statistically significant. For ease of interpretation, the results are discussed in terms of odds ratios. The results of the regression analyses are summarized below.

We expected that education would increase the odds of remaining childless for women, whereas we had no clear expectations for men. Our results are in line with our expectation for women; every extra level of educational attainment increases the odds of remaining childless by 14 percent. Educational attainment does not significantly increase men's odds of remaining childless.

Confirming our expectations, women with continuous employment have a 1.3 times higher odds of remaining childless. The opposite effect is observed among men with continuous employment: They have a 0.64 times lower odds of remaining childless. Having been continuously employed reduces men's odds of remaining childless by 36 per cent.

We expected that more years without a partner would increase the odds of remaining childless, and that women's odds would be stronger than men's odds. The first expectation is confirmed: Every extra year without a partner increases women's odds of remaining childless by 15 percent and men's odds by 17 percent. But the second is not: The impact of years without a partner does not significantly differ between women and men.

We had contrasting expectations regarding the impact of the age at start of the first union on childlessness. Nevertheless, we expected that women's odds would be stronger than men's. Our results show that age at first union does not significantly change women's or men's odds of remaining childless. The odds do not vary by gender.

We expected that no unions in the fertile years would strongly increase the odds of remaining childless, and that women's odds would not significantly differ from men's. Our results are in line with the first expectation: Never having had a partner increases the odds of remaining childless by about 7 times for women and 11.5 times for men. Contrary to our second expectation, men's odds of remaining childless are significantly higher than women's.

Finally, we had conflicting expectations regarding the impact of having had multiple unions during the fertile years on childlessness. Our results show that multiple unions increase both women's and men's odds of remaining childless: Women's odds increase by about 1.6 times, whereas men's odds increase by about 2.2 times. Men who have had

multiple relationships have significantly higher odds of remaining childless than their female counterparts.

**Table 2.3** Logistic regression analysis for variables predicting remaining childless for women (n = 2867) and men (n =2195), controlling for birth year

Predictor	Women		Men		Difference <sup>a</sup>
	<i>B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	<i>B</i>	<i>e<sup>B</sup></i>	
Educational attainment	.10***	1.14	.02	1.02	.09**
Uninterrupted occupational career	.27**	1.31	-.45***	0.64	.72***
Age at start first union	.03	1.03	-.01	0.99	.03
Years without partner in fertile years	.14***	1.15	.16***	1.17	.02
Number of unions in fertile years <sup>b</sup>					
0	1.93***	6.90	3.17***	11.50	1.24*
>1	.48***	1.61	.77***	2.16	.29*
Constant	-4.01***		-3.17***		
$\chi^2$	769.4		773.7		
<i>Df</i>	7		7		
% remained childless	16.8		19.9		

Note:  $e^B$  = exponentiated *B*.

<sup>a</sup>These differences are tested by looking at the significance level of the gender interaction in an interaction model

<sup>b</sup>Reference category: 1 union

Source: Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, wave 1.

\* $p < .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

## 2.5 Discussion

### 2.5.1 Conclusions and implications

Our study reveals gendered pathways into childlessness. Men and women who have followed similar life pathways nevertheless have disparate chances of remaining childless. First, women with higher levels of educational attainment are more likely to remain childless, whereas men's educational attainment does not shape their likelihood of remaining childless. Apparently, men do not experience the childbearing-work nexus in the way women do. Second, women who have no breaks over the course of their

employment career are less likely, whereas their male counterparts are more likely to enter parenthood. A stable career seems very important for men's transition to parenthood, which confirms recent German findings (Tölke & Diewald, 2003). Third, the impact of the marital history on childlessness varies by gender. Remaining without a partner during the fertile years is a major restriction for having children for women. Noteworthy, it appears to be an even larger restriction for men. Men's childlessness seems to be shaped primarily by the circumstances in their marital career, as De Meester et al (2005) also stated. Concerning their childbearing outcomes, men appear to depend heavily on what, or better said who, crosses their life path. The finding that men who have had multiple relationships are more likely to remain childless compared to their female counterparts reflects this notion. Women are somewhat more likely than men to seize second chances to have a child, which confirms other Dutch findings (Kalmijn & Gelissen, 2002).

Not all pathways are gendered. For example, the impact of years without a partner is similar for women and men. Furthermore, our findings show that age at first union is unrelated to childlessness among both women and men.

What can we learn from a focus on gendered pathways into childlessness? For the past decade, policies have been adopted to facilitate the combination of working and childrearing in effort to encourage women to have children (Gauthier, 1996; McDonald, 2006a, 2006b). Although most children are nowadays born of working women (Castles, 2003), childlessness rates did not go down. To understand contemporary rates of childlessness, we argue that the people's work, parenthood and marital histories should be studied jointly. For example, women who perceive their career as incompatible with childrearing may delay entering a serious relationship, because it might be a route toward parenthood. Men's childbearing behavior should also be positioned within the marital domain. It has been suggested that men aim for a stable occupation, then a partner and subsequently want children to complete the "package deal" (Townsend, 2002). Both a stable career and a partner need to be present for them to start a family (Tölke & Diewald, 2003). Our results suggest that childlessness debates require a shift in focus. Concerns about the incompatibility of work with caring tasks need to be supplemented with concerns about entering and remaining in partnerships.

People are now seen as pilots in charge of their life travels, creating their own biographies through personal choice and individual decisions. But they do not always turn out to be successful. In Western countries many fail to achieve the number of children that they anticipated having (Van Peer, 2002). Coordinating educational, occupational and marital careers is not a simple task. Furthermore, people do not always succeed in finding and keeping a potential significant other. Among people who experience the dissolution of a partnership, the proportion who remain childless is much higher than among those who have one lasting partnership (Latten & Kreijen, 2001). The

agentic point of view of the do-it-yourself biography does not do justice to demographic reality. Psychologically-based factors do not provide a sufficient explanation for why people remain childless. Our study provides the insight that childlessness is not only about 'choice'. Restrictions play a non-negligible role in why people remain childless.

### *2.5.2 Limitations and future directions*

Three limitations of our study should be noted. First, because of this study's cross-sectional design, inferences regarding the extent to which the educational, employment and marital pathway lead to the outcome of remaining childless are tenuous. We cannot rule out the possibility of reversed causation. This may especially be true for our measurement of continuity of employment. Investments in the occupational domain may be the result of remaining childless instead of its cause. Only longitudinal data will allow us to unravel such linkages. Nevertheless, our findings are in line with previous research. Gerson (1985) has shown that commitment to work, of which continuous employment can be seen as an indicator, increases the likelihood of remaining childless for women. Tölke and Diewald (2003) have recently shown that having a stable job increases the likelihood of entering a partnership, and subsequently, having children.

Second, because of the low numbers of cohabiters in our sample, we were not able to properly examine the role of unwed cohabitation versus marriage in the pathways to childlessness. The low proportion of people who have only cohabited and never married is characteristic of the cohorts under investigation. Our sample includes people born between 1923 and 1963. For them, cohabitation is a less conventional living arrangement than it is for cohorts that succeed them (Bumpass & Lu, 1999; CBS, 2006; US Census Bureau, 2003). The question of whether new forms of partnership contribute to childlessness requires a focus on younger cohorts than the ones considered here.

Finally, there are caveats regarding the categorization of childlessness used here. The present analysis centers on biological parenthood and does not take into account the possibility of parenthood of non-biological children, such as stepchildren and adopted children. The number of respondents in these groups is very small. Of all women and men aged 40-79, 1.2% have adopted children only and 2.4 percent live with step-children. Given the small numbers, these parents were excluded from the analyses. As the prevalence of non-traditional families has risen in the last decade, research that compares pathways into childlessness with pathways into non-biological parenthood would be particularly welcome.



# Chapter 3

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## Childlessness and norms of familial responsibility<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This chapter was co-authored with Prof. Dr. Pearl A. Dykstra and Dr. Anne-Rigt Poortman. A slightly different version of this paper is currently under review. An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the 'extending and extended families' conference held by the Centre for Research on Families and Relationships (CRFR), June 2007, Edinburgh (UK).



### 3.1 Introduction

From the moment childlessness became a topic of scientific research, the childless have been depicted in negative terms: Less well adjusted, less nurturing, more materialistic, more selfish, more individualistic and more career-oriented than parents (see for overviews (Ganong, Coleman, & Mapes, 1990; Houseknecht, 1987; Veevers, 1983). Although the growing prevalence and acceptance of childlessness among young cohorts has led to a less powerful stigma in recent decades (Koropecj-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Morgan, 1996; Thornton, 1989; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), the childless remain stereotyped as somewhat “individualistic” people who avoid social responsibility and are less prepared to commit themselves to helping others in society (Kopper & Smith, 2001; LaMastro, 2001; Letherby, 2002; Mueller & Yoder, 1999). This stereotype image of the childless appears in the debate about “the decline of the family”, where scholars have suggested that increased levels of childlessness contribute to declining levels of family solidarity (Bloom & Bennett, 1986; Hunt & Hunt, 1982). For example, it is likely that childlessness lowers affection and cohesion between adult children and their parents, when the latter feel that the childlessness of their children hampers their own transition into grandparenthood.

Despite prevailing stereotypes of the childless, little research has actually addressed whether the childless feel less responsible for others compared with people who have children. This may be even more surprising in the light of contemporary childlessness rates. As in other countries (Abma & Martinez, 2006; Rowland, 2007), childlessness rates have shown a steady increase among Dutch women born after the Second World War. Among those born between 1945 and 1949, 12 percent remained childless compared to 15 per cent of women born in the 1950s. Among women born in the 1960s and 1970s this percentage is likely to raise to 20 per cent (SCP/CBS, 2009). As 1 of every 5 individuals in the Netherlands will never have children, answering the question whether the childless feel less responsible for others compared with people who have children has both scientific and societal relevance.

We take up this issue by examining differences in norms of familial responsibility between childless individuals and parents. Familial responsibility is an aspect of the broader concept of familism (Heller, 1970; 1976) and refers to felt obligations to help each other among members of a kinship group.

In the literature on intergenerational obligations (Daatland & Herlofson, 2003; Gans & Silverstein, 2006; Lee, Peek, & Coward, 1998; Silverstein, Gans, & Yang, 2006; Stein et al., 1998) childlessness has remained an understudied topic. The few studies that take the impact of parental status into account (Daatland & Herlofson, 2003; Komter &

Vollebergh, 2002) assess childlessness in a rather crude way, merely distinguishing whether or not people have children at a particular moment.

Studies on family responsibility norms are absent in the literature on childlessness. Focusing on attitudes about marriage, cohabitation, divorce and gender roles, the literature shows that it is important to make a distinction between different types of childlessness; childless individuals who have voluntarily opted for a life without children have less traditional values and attitudes compared with involuntarily childless individuals and parents (Bram, 1984; Bulcroft & Teachman, 2003; Houseknecht, 1987; Jacobson & Heaton, 1991; Veevers, 1983). It is therefore likely that people without children do not all hold similar norms of familial responsibility. For a nuanced and proper assessment of associations between childlessness and familial responsibility, we make a distinction between the childless based on volition.

We pose that taking the diversity among the childless into account not only does justice to social reality, but also advances our understanding of why childless individuals differ from parents with respect to their norms of familial responsibility. In general, the literature addresses two main underlying processes: adaptation and selection (Lesthaeghe & Moors, 2002). Differences between parents and childless individuals may be attributable to adaptation; i.e. life course events contribute to changes in previously held values (adaptation effect), either by reinforcing or by reconsidering them (Lesthaeghe & Moors, 2002). In the context of our research question, adaptation implies that the transition to parenthood changes people's norms of familial responsibility.

Differences between parents and childless individuals may also be attributable to selection; i.e. familial responsibility norms affect the way individuals opt for specific life course pathways (Lesthaeghe & Moors, 2002). For example, people with weak norms of familial responsibility might be less likely to become parents than those with a strong sense of responsibility. If selection is at play, it would be wrong to compare parents with "the" childless, given that the intentionally childless are a different group of individuals from the start (Rovi, 1994). Scholars should therefore make a distinction between childless individuals based on volition and compare these groups with parents. As prior studies on intergenerational obligations have not made such comparisons, it has not been possible to gain insight into selection and adaptation. This paper makes a distinction between the childless based on the voluntary or involuntary nature of their childless state and compares them with parents, allowing us to detect the footprints of selection and adaptation.

When analyzing people's answers to questions concerning the voluntariness of their childless state, it is important to distinguish between childless people who are in their fertile years and those who are beyond the fertile age as their answers may be biased in different ways. First, as we live in pronatalistic societies, it takes courage and

determination to state that one does not want to have children (Rovi, 1994). Social pressure may therefore lead people to answer that they would like to have children, although their true feelings may be the opposite. As a result, some people in their fertile years may answer that they intend to have children although they actually want to remain childless, clouding the category of individuals who intend to have children.

Second, to avoid dissonance, people are likely to retrospectively adjust their feelings to their actual parental status. Therefore, some people beyond their fertile years will answer that they are voluntarily childless although they may actually have wanted to have children, which clouds the category of individuals who perceive themselves as voluntarily childless. In sum, solely focusing on people in their fertile years may lead to distorted results among the childless who did not choose to remain childless, while solely focusing on those beyond the fertile age may lead to distorted results among those who did opt for a childless life. This implies that a reliable assessment of associations between childlessness and norms of familial responsibility requires a *separate analysis* of the childless both in and beyond their fertile years. Unfortunately, in the literature on childlessness, studies on associations between childlessness and general values have either focused only on childless individuals in their fertile years (see for example Bram, 1985), or only on those beyond their fertile years (Callan, 1987) or on both without making a distinction between them (Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003). As a result, the bias issue has not been addressed and results may therefore have been misclassified.

In this paper, we separate childless individuals in their fertile years from those beyond their fertile years and we make a distinction between the childless based on whether or not they chose to remain childless. Among those of fertile age, we distinguish between those who intend to remain childless and those who intend to have children. Among the childless beyond their fertile years, we distinguish between those who perceive themselves as voluntarily childless and those who see themselves as involuntarily childless. The analyses in this paper are based on data from the second wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), a nationally representative survey conducted in 2006-2007 from which we selected 2096 male and 3069 female respondents.

### **3.2 Childlessness and norms of familial responsibility**

Predictions in two diverging directions can be made regarding the association between childlessness and norms of familial responsibility. In line with common beliefs, childless people are expected to have a weaker sense of familial responsibility compared with parents. One line of reasoning suggests that adaptation takes place: Family-related issues are more highly valued when people have children than when they do not have children. Parenthood, according to Gutmann (1975), fosters greater responsibility towards one's

family, as becoming a parent reaffirms moral, civic and ethical norms. Parenthood makes goals in life important that transcend the individual self (Barnett, Marshall, & Pleck, 1992; Dykstra, 2006b; Furstenberg, 2005) and people become more directed towards wider circles of family, neighborhood and community (Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006). Alternatively, selection may be at play. Research has shown that childless individuals who intend to remain childless are more individualistic and have a greater preference for self-selected contact compared with parents and childless individuals who intend to have children (Rovi, 1994). People with weaker norms of familial responsibility may therefore be more likely to remain childless. Note that adaptation and selection do not lead to different hypotheses. They reflect different processes that underlie the expected negative association between childlessness and a sense of obligation towards family.

The opposing view is that childless individuals have stronger norms of familial responsibility in comparison with parents. Parenthood, like marriage (Cosser, 1974; Gerstel & Sarkisian, 2006) can be seen as a “greedy institution”, directing attention away from the wider circle of family. People may adapt their feelings of familial responsibility to personal circumstances that restrict their ability to provide family care (e.g. competing demands). Therefore, the childless may feel more responsible when it comes to supporting their wider circle of family compared with people with children, as the childless do not have childrearing obligations. The alternative explanation – selection – is that strong norms of familial responsibility increase the likelihood that people will remain childless as the involvement with family members may be so strong and time-consuming that these individuals decide not to have children of their own. Again, adaptation and selection do not lead to different hypotheses.

*Distinguishing between adaptation and selection.* In the context of childlessness and familial responsibility, adaptation implies that becoming a parent serves to reinforce people’s norms of familial responsibility. From an adaptation perspective, those who have made the transition into parenthood are expected to have different values from those who have not made this transition. This means that, when adaptation is at play, all childless individuals, whether by volition or not, will differ from parents in terms of their norms of familial responsibility. It also means that childless individuals who opt for a childless life do not differ from those who want, or wanted to have children.

Selection implies that people’s norms of familial responsibility affect the likelihood that they will enter parenthood. From a selection perspective, only those who opt for a childless life are expected to have distinctive norms of familial responsibility.

Among the childless of fertile age, this means that only the childless who intend to remain childless will have different norms of familial responsibility compared with individuals who already have or intend to have children. Childless individuals who intend

to have children are not expected to differ from parents, as the former are likely to become parents in the future. Among the childless beyond their fertile years, only those who see their childless state as voluntary will have different norms of familial responsibility compared with involuntarily childless individuals and parents. People who are involuntarily childless are not expected to differ from parents as the former embrace the parenting role in principle and are assumed to differ from parents only in terms of the fact that they have not succeeded in becoming a parent.

### **3.3 Data and method**

#### *3.3.1 Data source*

We have used data from the second wave of the public release file of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS). The NKPS is a large-scale panel survey on family ties, which started in 2002 among a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 79 residing in private households in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2005). The data were collected by means of computer-assisted interview schedules. The second wave was conducted between 2006 and 2007. The overall response rate of this wave was 74%. The cooperation rate for the second wave (excluding respondents who were too ill to participate, respondents who had moved abroad or died in between the waves) was 84%. We decided to make use of information from wave 2 rather than wave 1 as the first wave does not provide information on people's perceptions of their childless state. For our purposes, respondents were selected between the ages of 21 and 65. Our final sample included 5,165 respondents.

#### *3.3.2 Dependent variables*

The literature on intergenerational obligations distinguishes two types of norms relating to familial responsibility. Different scholars give different names to them, but we shall refer to universal and personal norms (following Lee, Netzer, & Coward, 1994). Whereas the former refer to *general* norms pertaining to family support giving, the latter refer to individual feelings of personal responsibility towards one's own family. In the literature, both types are conceptually distinguished (Daatland & Herlofson, 2003; Ganong & Coleman, 2005; Lee et al., 1994; Piercy, 1998; Silverstein et al., 2006), but previous research has studied only universal norms regarding responsibility, with the exception of Ganong & Coleman's (2005) vignette study. Scholars have suggested that people's norms of familial responsibility may differ depending on whether they relate to universal or personal norms (Daatland & Herlofson, 2003; Gans & Silverstein, 2006; Lee et al., 1994; Silverstein et al., 2006). For example, even when individuals embrace the value of universal familial responsibility, they may not feel responsible to provide support

themselves. To find out whether differences between childless individuals and parents depend on the type of norm, we included measures of both universal and personal familial responsibility norms in our analyses. Respondents were told explicitly that “family” in the survey context consisted of “a partner, parents, children, brothers and sisters, grandparents, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces”. Universal familial responsibility was measured using a four-item scale. Scale items are: “One should always be able to count on family”, “Family members should be ready to support one another, even if they don’t like each other”, “If one is troubled, family should be there to provide support” and “Family members must help each other, in good times and bad”. Respondents rated each item on a 5-point Likert scale. The reliability of the four items was  $\alpha = .86$ . Answers to these four questions were added up, potentially ranging from 4 (*weak familial responsibility*) up to 20 (*strong familial responsibility*).

Personal familial responsibility was derived from the question: “If there were a problem in your family, how responsible would you feel to solve the problem?” The responses ranged from 1 (*not at all responsible*) to 3 (*very responsible*).

### 3.3.3 Independent variables

In this paper, we analyze familial responsibility norms among childless people in and beyond their fertile years. Therefore, we make use of two *separate* samples of individuals. In the young sample, distinctions among childless individuals are based on childbearing intentions. In the survey, women under 45 and men under 50 received questions about their childbearing intentions. People without children were asked the question: “Do you think you’ll have children in the future?” Answers were 1 (*yes*), 2 (*no*), and 3 (*don’t know*). Those without biological or adopted children who said they did not intend to have children were categorized as: intention to remain childless (175 men and 155 women). Those without biological or adopted children who said they intended to have children were placed in the category: intention to become a parent (243 men and 253 women). Women under 45 and men under 50 with biological or adopted children were categorized as parents (763 men and 1097 women). Only 48 men (4%) and 54 women (4%) said they did not know whether they would have children in the future. We consider these numbers to be too small to obtain reliable results and have therefore excluded these respondents from our analyses.

In the older sample, distinctions among childless individuals are based on how they perceive their childless state: 1 (*voluntarily childless*) and 2 (*involuntarily childless*). Among childless women aged 45 and over, 176 identified themselves as voluntarily childless and 142 as involuntarily childless. Among childless men aged 50 and over, 106 said they were voluntarily childless and 104 men said they were involuntarily childless.

Women over 45 and men over 50 with biological or adopted children were placed in the parent category (1246 women and 705 men).

#### 3.3.4 Control variables

The literature identifies several social characteristics that differentiate individuals by the strength of their norms of familial responsibility and that are associated with childlessness, including educational attainment, partnership status and religion (Barber, 2001; Bowen, 1999; Clarkberg, Stolzenberg, & Waite, 1995; Gans & Silverstein, 2006; Hagestad & Call, 2007; Heaton et al., 1999; McAllister & Clarke, 1998; Reitsma, 2007; Schoen et al., 1999; Stein et al., 1998). We included these characteristics as controls in our analyses. Information about the respondents' education was derived from the question: "What is the highest level of education you pursued?" Answers ranged from 1 (*did not complete elementary school*) to 11 (*post-graduate*).

With respect to partnership status, people were considered to have a partner if they lived with a partner. We differentiated between: 1 (*never partnered*), 2 (*cohabiting*), 3 (*married*), and 4 (*single and formerly partnered*).

Religiosity was based on the two questions: "Do you count yourself as belonging to a particular faith, religious denomination or church?" and "How often do you currently attend services of a church or community of faith?". Respondents were coded 0 when they were *not religious*. They were coded 1 when they were *religious, but hardly ever went to church*, 2 when they were *religious and went once or a few times a year*, 3 when they were *religious and went once or a few times a month* and finally they were coded 4 when they were *religious and went once or a few times a week*.

Means and standard deviations for our dependent and control variables are shown in Table 3.1.

#### 3.3.5 Analytic strategy

To facilitate interpretation of our results, we present differences between childless individuals and parents graphically, but see appendix 3.1 for a table with the adjusted means and tests of significance. Adjusted means derived from multiple classification analysis (MCA) of our dependent variables served as input for the groups. The means are adjusted for level of education, partnership status and religion. Results for significance tests between the groups of childless individuals and parents are discussed in the text below.

The measure for personal familial responsibility had only three answer categories and was not measured at interval level. For that reason, we ran additional analyses (not shown) with an ordered logit model. Results (available upon request) were very similar to those based on the MCA.

As mentioned, our analyses are based on two separate samples. The left set of columns in each figure details the family responsibility norms of respondents who are of fertile age. The right set of columns details those of respondents who are beyond their fertile years.

The literature shows gender differences in care-giving, including providing support and care to relatives, with women being more oriented towards their family than men (Hagestad, 1992; Komter & Vollebergh, 2002; Marks & McLanahan, 1993; Rosenthal, 1985; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). This notion was confirmed by our preliminary analyses, which showed significant interaction effects for gender. Therefore, our analyses were performed separately for women and men. Figures 3.1 and 3.2 detail women's and men's universal familial responsibility norms; Figures 3.3 and 3.4 detail women's and men's personal familial responsibility norms respectively.

### **3.4 Results**

In Figure 3.1, the left set of columns, our younger sample, shows that childless women who intend to remain childless have significantly weaker norms of universal familial responsibility than childless women with childbearing intentions and mothers. Childless women with childbearing intentions and mothers do not differ significantly from each other. The finding that only women who intend to remain childless differ from mothers suggests that selection is at play here. Among women in the older sample, we found that only voluntarily childless women have significantly weaker norms of universal familial responsibility compared with mothers. Involuntarily childless women do not differ significantly from voluntarily childless women, nor do they differ significantly from mothers. These findings suggest footprints of both selection and adaptation and show that it depends on the degree of volition whether or not childless women differ from mothers in terms of their universal familial responsibility norms. Childless women have weaker norms of familial responsibility compared with mothers when their childless state is of their own volition.

**Table 3.1** Descriptive statistics of the dependent, independent and control variables, by gender

Variables	<i>Means (S.D.)</i>				Range
	Women aged 21 - 44 ( <i>n</i> =1505)	Women aged 45 - 65 ( <i>n</i> =1564)	Men aged 21 - 49 ( <i>n</i> = 1181)	Men aged 50 - 65 ( <i>n</i> = 915)	
Universal responsibility	14.44 (2.8)	14.28 (2.9)	14.75 (2.8)	14.69 (2.8)	4-20
Personal responsibility	2.32 (0.6)	2.22 (0.6)	2.26 (0.6)	2.21 (0.6)	1-3
<i>Parental status</i>					
Intentions remain childless	0.10	-	0.15	-	
Intentions parent	0.17	-	0.21	-	
Parents	0.73	-	0.64	-	
Voluntarily childless	-	0.10	-	0.10	
Involuntarily childless	-	0.10	-	0.10	
Parents	-	0.80	-	0.80	
Age	35.71 (5.8)	53.43 (6.3)	38.87 (7.0)	56.35 (5.1)	21-65
Educational level <sup>a</sup>	7.19 (2.4)	6.28 (2.7)	7.24 (2.5)	6.83 (2.9)	1-11
<i>Partnership status</i>					
Never partnered	11	16	9	10	
Cohabiting	18	17	7	7	
Married	57	59	62	68	
Single, formerly partnered	14	12	22	15	
Religious <sup>b</sup>	0.95 (1.31)	1.12 (1.36)	0.94 (1.31)	1.13 (1.36)	0-4

*Note:* <sup>a</sup>1 (did not complete elementary school; 11 (post-graduate) <sup>b</sup> 0 (not religious); 1 (religious, hardly ever go); 2 (religious, once or a few times a year); 3 (religious, once or a few times a month); 4 (religious, once or a few times a week).

**Figure 3.1** Women’s norms of universal familial responsibility

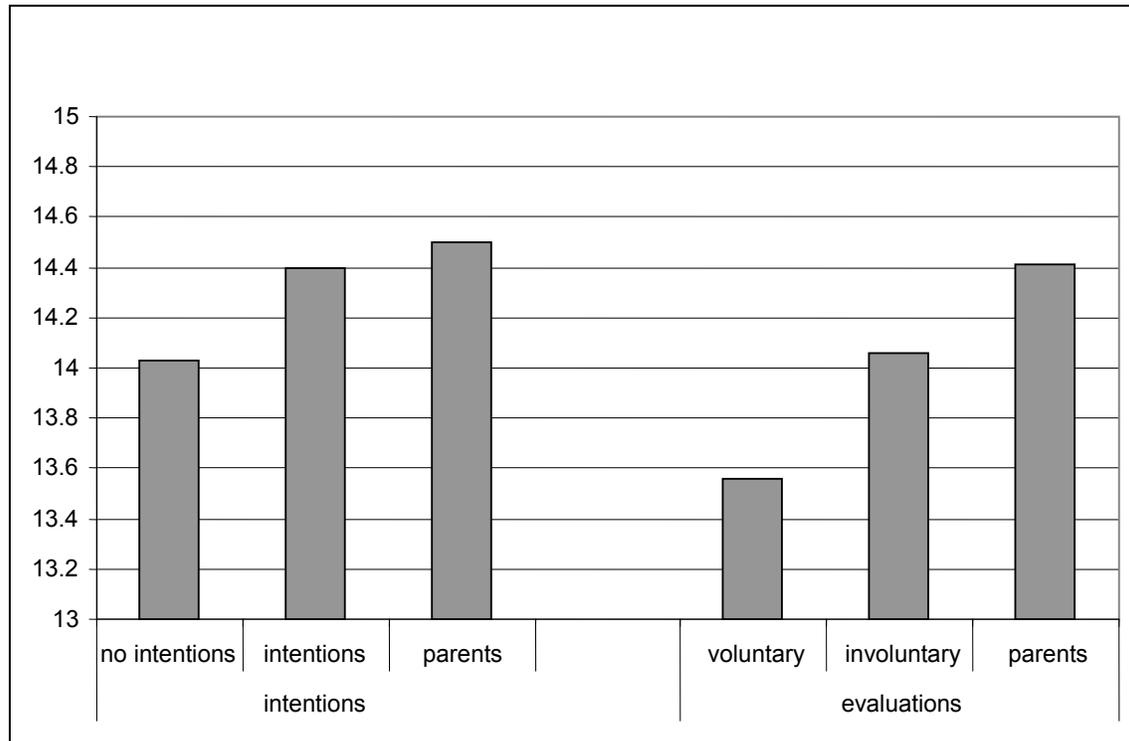
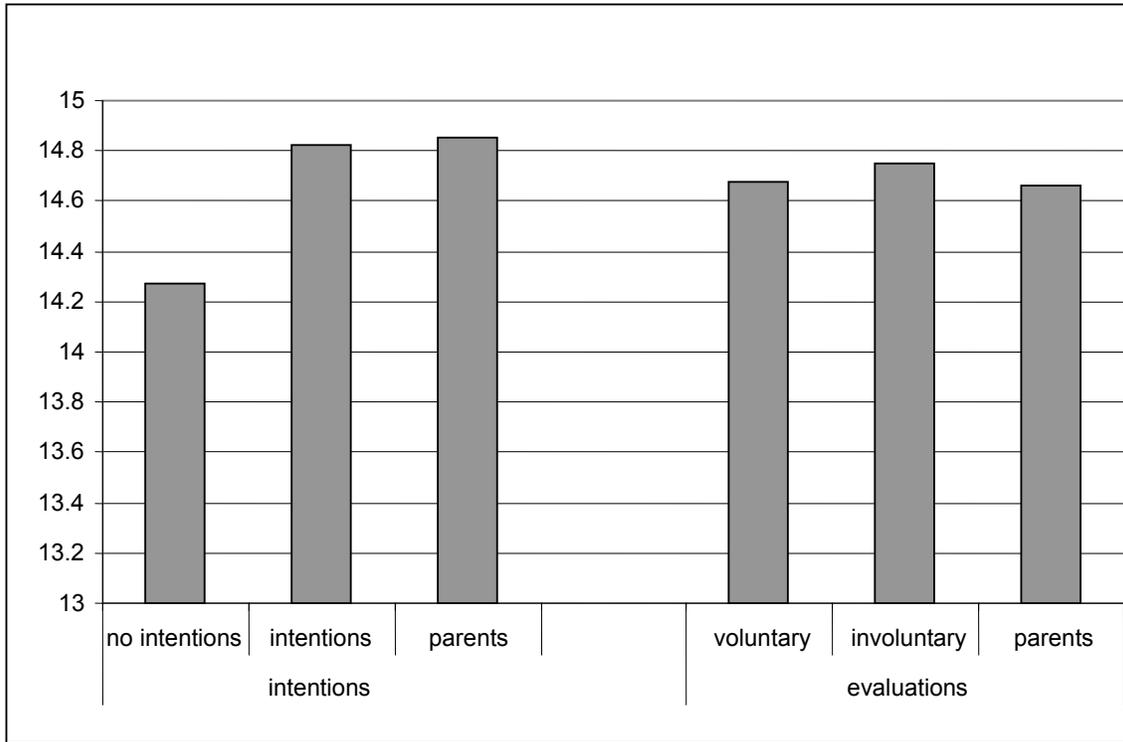


Figure 3.2 details men’s universal familial responsibility norms. The left set of columns, our younger sample, shows that men who intend to remain childless have a significantly weaker sense of universal familial responsibility compared with fathers and men who intend to become fathers. These two latter groups do not differ significantly from each other. The finding that only men who intend to remain childless differ from fathers suggests that selection is at play here. Among men in our older sample, we found that voluntarily childless men, involuntarily childless men and fathers do not differ significantly from each other in terms of their norms of universal familial responsibility.

Turning to personal familial responsibility, Figure 3.3 shows no significant differences between women, neither in our younger, nor our older sample. When it comes to their sense of responsibility towards their own families, childless women and mothers appear to be similar.

**Figure 3.2** Men's norms of universal familial responsibility



**Figure 3.3** Women's norms of personal familial responsibility

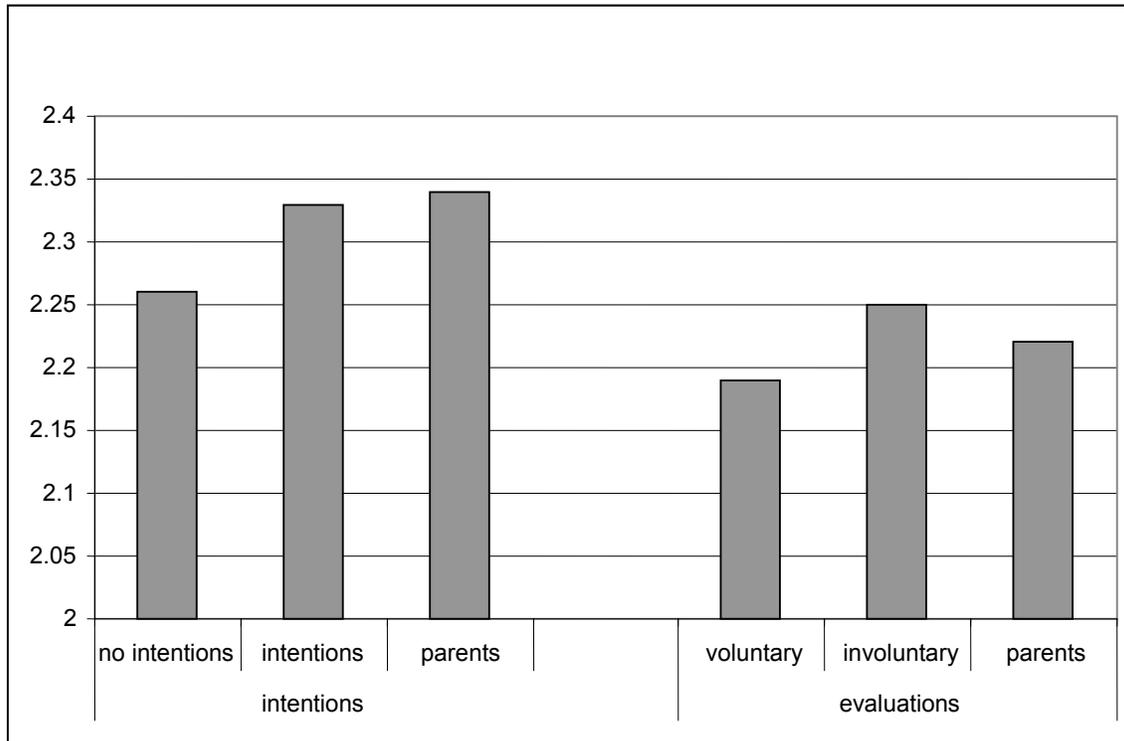
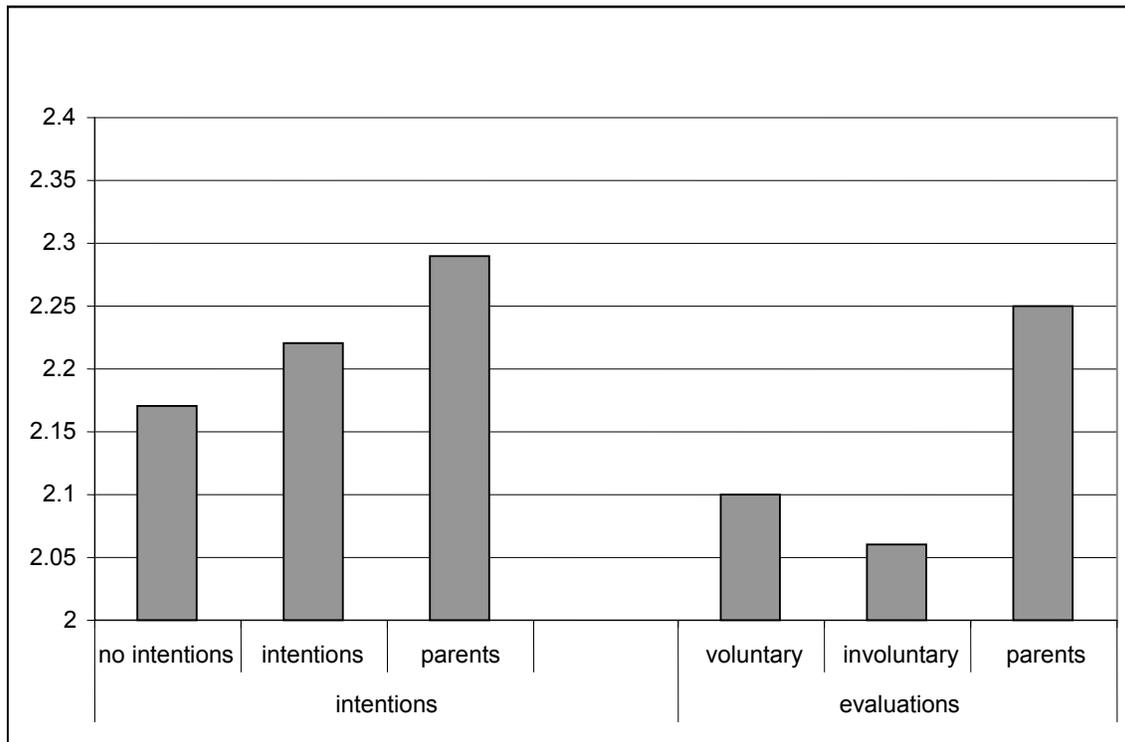


Figure 3.4 shows men's personal familial responsibility norms. Looking at the left set of columns, the younger sample of men, we see that childless men who intend to remain childless have a significantly weaker sense of personal familial responsibility than fathers. Childless men who intend to have children in the future do not differ from childless men who intend to remain childless, nor do they differ from fathers in terms of their norms of personal familial responsibility. These findings suggest footprints of both selection and adaptation. Turning to the older sample in the right set of columns, we see that both voluntarily and involuntarily childless men have significantly weaker norms of personal familial responsibility than fathers. Voluntarily and involuntarily childless men do not differ significantly from each other. The finding that they differ from fathers suggests that adaptation is at play here. Permanently childless men, regardless of the degree of volition, have a weaker sense of personal familial responsibility than fathers.

**Figure 3.4** Men's norms of personal familial responsibility



### 3.5 Conclusions

The first aim of this paper was to find out whether childless people have weaker norms of familial responsibility than parents. In order to properly analyze differences between childless individuals and parents, we distinguished two types of childless people based on volition. We found that not all individuals without children have weaker norms of familial responsibility. Where differences were found, they indicated, with one exception, that only childless people who choose, or have chosen to remain childless have a weaker sense of responsibility. These findings underline the importance of knowing the degree of volition in order to fully understand differences between parents and people who are childless. As others have suggested, a subjective definition of not having children is crucial to accurate assessments of childlessness in people's lives (Connidis & Campbell, 1995).

Making a distinction between voluntarily and involuntarily childless people has enabled us to find out whether selection or adaptation underlies differences in norms of familial responsibility. We found most evidence for selection. Only those who voluntarily opt for a childless life, not those who want or wanted to have children, were shown to have weaker norms of familial responsibility than parents. We found strong adaptation among older men: norms of personal familial responsibility were much stronger among fathers than among both voluntarily and involuntarily childless men. An explanation might be that the transition to fatherhood has led men to think solely of "family" as their nuclear family, rather than seeing family as the wider circle of family members. As feelings of family obligation have been shown to be stronger for close family and to decrease with a lower level of relatedness (Rossi & Rossi, 1990), fathers – with their children in mind – may have expressed stronger feelings of familial responsibility than childless men.

Becoming a parent serves to reinforce men's norms of personal familial responsibility. Among women, by contrast, parental status appears to be of little importance when it comes to their personal feelings of responsibility. Previous research has consistently shown that women have a special role as kin keepers who sustain family contacts and tend to be more family-oriented than men (Hagestad, 1992; Komter & Vollebergh, 2002; Marks & McLanahan, 1993; Rosenthal, 1985; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). So whereas women were found to always feel responsible for their own families, men appear to need the presence of children to activate the significance of family in their own personal lives.

In contrasting universal with personal norms of familial responsibility, we found differences between childless individuals and parents. Interesting results were found for women. Although voluntarily childless women do not have weaker expressions of personal familial responsibility than mothers, they do have a weaker sense of universal familial responsibility compared with mothers. It appears that voluntarily childless women do not want to impose responsibility on others. This fits with the notion that voluntarily childless

individuals have individualistic attitudes and believe that everybody should decide for themselves how responsible they want to be (Kopper & Smith, 2001; LaMastro, 2001; Letherby, 2002; Mueller & Yoder, 1999).

Our attempt to contrast universal with personal familial responsibility norms is a first step towards studying differences between universal and personal familial responsibility in a large-scale survey study. Our measure for personal familial responsibility was based on only one item, with a range of no more than three answer categories. A measure that consists of more items might be more reliable. Future research that takes into account more elaborate measures of personal familial responsibility would be a welcome addition to the literature on intergenerational obligations.

Furthermore, family is a broad concept. Despite the fact that respondents were told explicitly that “family” in the survey context consisted of “a partner, parents, children, brothers and sisters, grandparents, grandchildren, uncles, aunts, cousins, nephews and nieces”, other concepts of family may have come to mind and may have influenced the respondents’ answers. When making comparisons across groups, it would be useful if in future research scholars would be able to more accurately and more carefully specify what they mean by “family”.

In this paper we started off by observing that in the literature the childless tend to be depicted as lacking social responsibility. Our results showed that on the whole childless individuals and parents do not differ strongly in terms of familial responsibility. But when they do, only those who are childless by choice tend to have weaker norms of familial responsibility. Despite these “individualistic” characteristics, childless women were not found to express less responsibility towards their own families. In other words, what people feel family members in general should do for their families does not necessarily tally with what they feel they themselves should do for their own families. Our research shows that women, irrespective of their parental status, feel personally responsible for their own families. This finding does not substantiate the socially constructed image of the childless as being selfish and individualistic. Only men were found to need children of their own to activate the significance of family in their personal lives. As women are the kin keepers of the family, and as childless women were found to feel as responsible for their own family members as mothers, our study did not yield evidence for the claim that increasing rates of childlessness contribute to declining levels of family solidarity.

**Appendix 3.1** Adjusted means and tests of significance

Variables	<i>Adjusted means</i>	
	Universal responsibility	Personal responsibility
<i>Women</i>		
No childbearing intentions	13.96 <sup>ab</sup>	2.26
Childbearing intentions	14.38 <sup>c</sup>	2.32
Mothers	14.52 <sup>c</sup>	2.33
Voluntary childless	13.42 <sup>a</sup>	2.19
Involuntary childless	14.07	2.26
Mothers	14.41 <sup>e</sup>	2.22
<i>Men</i>		
No childbearing intentions	14.38 <sup>ab</sup>	2.17 <sup>a</sup>
Childbearing intentions	14.89 <sup>c</sup>	2.24
Fathers	14.78 <sup>c</sup>	2.28 <sup>c</sup>
Voluntary childless	14.77	2.11 <sup>a</sup>
Involuntary childless	14.91	2.07 <sup>a</sup>
Fathers	14.64	2.24 <sup>de</sup>

*Note:* <sup>a</sup> Differ significantly from parents <sup>b</sup> Differ significantly from those with childbearing intentions <sup>c</sup> Differ significantly from those without childbearing intentions <sup>d</sup> Differ significantly from involuntary childless <sup>e</sup> Differ significantly from voluntary childless



# Chapter 4

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## The transition to parenthood and well-being: The impact of partner status and work hour transitions<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This chapter was co-authored with Prof. Dr. Pearl A. Dykstra and Dr. Anne-Rigt Poortman. A slightly different version of this paper is currently under review. Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the national sociology conference (Dag van de Sociologie), June 2009, Amsterdam and at the European Sociological Association conference, September 2009, Lisbon.



## 4.1 Introduction

The birth of a baby brings major changes to the lives of new parents. The transition to parenthood signifies an increase in emotional ties and marks entry into a new, lifetime, role (Clausen, 1986; Feeney, Hohaus, Noller, & Alexander, 2001). Early work suggested that entry into parenthood precipitated a crisis for family members (Dyer, 1963; LeMasters, 1957), but researchers found little empirical support for this view of parenthood (Fawcett, 1972; Hobbs & Cole, 1976; Russell, 1974), showing that the entry into parenthood can be associated with both joys and tribulations. These mixed findings led to a movement away from the question ‘does parenthood have negative consequences for individuals’ to a focus on the ‘conditions under which parenthood has negative/positive consequences’. Since that moment, several longitudinal studies have focused on understanding the variability in people’s adjustment to the transition to parenthood (for reviews see Cox, 1985; Demo & Cox, 2000; Glenn, 1990; Veroff, Young, & Coon, 1997). Belsky and colleagues were one of the first to explicitly look for such conditions and their work centralizes the significance of violated expectations (Belsky, 1985; Belsky, Ward, & Rovine, 1986). Others have followed this tradition, showing that discrepancies between prenatal expectations and postnatal experiences affect the ease of adjustment to parenthood (Kalmuss, Davidson, & Cushman, 1992; Lawrence, Nylén, & Cobb, 2007; Pancer, Pratt, Hunsberger, & Gallant, 2000; Ruble, Fleming, Hackel, & Stangor, 1988).

Against the backdrop of the increasing numbers of mothers of young children that remain in the work force and (some moderate) changes in fathers’ roles and participation in parenthood, the focus of contemporary inquiries has shifted towards behavior in other life domains as possible explanations for the variability in adaptation to parenthood. Studies focus on areas such as household labor (Baxter, Hewitt, & Haynes, 2008; Dribe & Stanfors, 2009; Helms-Erikson, 2001), and personal and couple leisure time (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Nomaguchi & Bianchi, 2004). Few scholars, however, have considered the co-occurrence of changes such as those in partner status and work hours in examining the impact of becoming a parent on well-being. Close to the arrival of the first child, many individuals decide to get married (Baizán, Aassve, & Billari, 2004; Bennett, Bloom, & Miller, 1995; Berrington, 2001) and many, mostly women, change their work hours when their first child is born (Hynes & Clarkberg, 2005). Given that such changes are known to have an impact on feelings of well-being (Kim & McKenry, 2002; Marks & Lambert, 1998; Rogers, 1996), they deserve attention in studies which assess the impact of entering parenthood on well-being. Partner status transitions have received little attention because longitudinal samples tend to be based only on those who were continuously married between waves (for reviews see Demo & Cox, 2000; Veroff et al., 1997). We know little about the impact of transitions into cohabitation and marriage, in relation to that of

becoming a parent, on well-being. Likewise, we know little about the relative impact of changes in work hours. One of the few studies focusing on the impact of new parents' work hours and work schedules, shows that working non-day shifts can be a risk factor for depressive symptoms and relational conflict (Perry-Jenkins, Goldberg, Pierce, & Sayer, 2007). In this paper, we take into account the impact of changes in partner status and work hours. Our research question is what the effects of the transition to parenthood are on well-being when changes in partner status and work hours are taken into account.

As Durkheim's work (Durkheim, 1951 [1896]) already suggested, and others have shown thereafter (Belsky & Rovine, 1990; Cast, 2004; Cowan et al., 1985; Fleming, Ruble, Flett, & Van Wagner, 1990; Kaitz & Katzir, 2004; Russell, 1974), the transition to parenthood may yield both positive and negative feelings. Focusing on a single measure of well-being may then be misleading, because it may not truly represent the complexity of affective changes that surround the birth of a child. Given that the transition to parenthood affects people's roles and relationships (Cast, 2004), it is very likely that different feelings will be experienced in the context of different roles and relationships. For example, the baby may provide new parents with increased feelings of life satisfaction, but simultaneously the change to a triad may place heavy burdens on the partnership. To obtain a nuanced picture of the impact of becoming a parent, multiple facets of well-being need to be assessed. In this paper, we focus on 6 outcomes of well-being; four that tap into personal well-being -- overall life satisfaction, loneliness, positive and negative daily affect—and two that tap into partnership well-being, namely partner conflicts and partnership satisfaction.

To sum up, this paper adds to the literature on the impact of entering parenthood on well-being by taking into account the influence of transitions in partner status and work hours. Multiple indicators of well-being are incorporated into our analyses. We make use of fixed effect models to assess whether making the transition to parenthood affects well-being. The analyses are based on data from both waves of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), a nationally representative panel study, conducted between 2002 and 2007. 338 female and 262 male respondents, who had one and the same partner during both waves, and who were childless at the time of the first interview, were selected.

## **4.2 Theoretical framework**

### *4.2.1 Partner status and work hour transitions*

The link between marriage and childbearing has weakened during the last decades (Kiernan, 2004; Smith et al., 1996; Smock, 2000; US Census Bureau, 2004). In the Netherlands, nowadays 50 per cent of children are born out of wedlock (De Graaf, 2009). However, most childbearing still occurs within a union (Bumpass & Lu, 1999; Kiernan, 2004; Smock,

2000), also in the Netherlands (CBS, 2008b). Prior research on the fertility of married and cohabiting couples indicates that childbearing is still more common in legal marriages than in cohabiting unions (Manning, 1995; Smock, 2000). Many individuals marry prior to or soon after the birth of their first child, although these numbers have been decreasing in recent years, a process also witnessed in the Netherlands (Latten, 2004; Van der Meulen & De Graaf, 2006). Transitions into cohabitation, and especially transitions into marriage, are shown to be beneficial for one's well-being (Brown, 2000; Horwitz & White, 1998; Kim & McKenry, 2002). As partnership transitions are affected by the transition to parenthood and have an influence on well-being, we control for them in our analyses.

Transitions in work hours are the second type of changes we consider. The literature shows strong relationships between becoming a parent and work hours, although the direction of the effect differs between women and men. Women are more likely to scale back their work week when they become mothers to be able to devote time to childrearing (Hynes & Clarkberg, 2005). Men on the other hand continue to work the same or to increase the number of hours when they make the transition to parenthood in order to provide for their family (Gjerdingen & Center, 2004; Jacobs & Gerson, 2004). Both patterns are also found in the Netherlands (Mol, 2008). The number of hours people work has a strong impact on well-being. Research has consistently shown that work roles are beneficial for men's and women's psychological health (Barnett & Hyde, 2001; Hatten, Vinter, & Williams, 2002; Warin, Solomon, Lewis, & Langford, 1999). However, combining work with family life can also lead to work-family conflicts (O'Laughlin & Bischoff, 2005; Winslow, 2005), and to decreased well-being. Given the demands of long work hours, many new parents face the challenge of finding enough time to spend with their family and for themselves (Perry-Jenkins et al., 2007). Experiencing time pressure has negative repercussions for mothers' and fathers' well-being (Nomaguchi, Milkie, & Bianchi, 2005). Given that work hour changes are related to the transition to parenthood and also have an influence on well-being, we control for them in our analyses.

#### *4.2.2 Well-being*

*Personal well-being.* Scholars have argued that the assessment of feelings of well-being involves both cognitive and affective evaluations of life (Diener, 1984). In this study, we include two cognitive evaluations of the quality of personal life, namely life satisfaction and loneliness.

Becoming a parent is usually described as one of the most significant developmental tasks of adulthood, and is often interpreted as indicating that an individual has reached maturity (Hoffman & Manis, 1979). Studies report that people may feel they have personally grown and gained life fulfillment by having children (Baumeister, 1991). Therefore, we hypothesize that becoming a parent is beneficial for feelings of overall

satisfaction with life. Our expectations regarding the impact on loneliness are somewhat less clear. On the one hand, one may argue that the arrival of a child connects parents to the larger family and the community (Dykstra, 2006b; Furstenberg, 2005). However, children may also isolate their parents from the outside world, and this may be especially be the case for mothers who are spending much time with their child in the first couple of months of maternity leave. Entry into parenthood may thus both increase and decrease feelings of loneliness. A hypothesis is therefore not formulated, and the link between the transition to parenthood and loneliness will be explored.

In addition to cognitive evaluations of personal life, we include measures of daily affective mood because they reflect the day to day constraints, demands, and costs of parenthood. Research shows that children create substantial new strains on parents' time, and their physical and emotional energy (LaRossa & LaRossa, 1981). These strains may decrease daily affective mood —adults with young children tend to be less happy, worry more, and experience higher levels of anxiety and depression (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003) in comparison to adults without children.

Assessments of daily mood often distinguish positive and negative affect, which are relatively independent feelings (Bradburn, 1969; Diener et al 1985). In this paper, we separate both affects accordingly. Gender differences in self-reports of daily mood also underscore the importance of distinction in positive and negative. Men report positive moods more often than women, while women report negative moods more often than men (Simon & Nath, 2004). In general, we hypothesize that the transition to parenthood leads to a drop in positive affect and an increase in negative affect.

*Partnership well-being.* Most studies on the transition to parenthood have focused on the impact of the arrival of the first child on the marital relationship. Findings generally show that marital satisfaction deteriorates when couples become parents (for reviews see Cox, 1985; Demo & Cox, 2000; Glenn, 1990; Twenge, Campbell, & Foster, 2003; Veroff et al., 1997). The transition to parenthood requires a reorganization of the partnership to meet new challenges, making the couple vulnerable to stress and conflict. As Diener (2000) suggests that the frequency of emotions may be a better indicator of well-being than the intensity of feelings, we do not only focus on people's evaluation of partnership satisfaction, but we also include the reported frequency of conflicts with one's partner. We hypothesize that becoming a parent is detrimental for both one's partnership satisfaction and the number of reported conflicts with one's partner.

### *4.2.3 A separate focus on women and men*

In this paper, we use a gendered lens when focusing on the transition to parenthood. As men and women move through life in multiple domains, they often encounter different opportunities and restrictions and are differentially affected by change. Research shows that women are more involved in the parenting role at the time of early parenthood (Alexander & Higgins, 1993). For women, becoming a parent is in most cases a more life changing transition than for men in terms of work hours, childcare, leisure and housework, as well as in terms of their relationship with their partners and others (Baxter et al., 2008; Bird, 1997; Bost, Cox, Burchinal, & Payne, 2002; Dribe & Stanfors, 2009; Nomaguchi & Bianchi, 2004; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Nomaguchi et al., 2005; Twenge et al., 2003). Scholars argue that the burdens of combining work, household tasks and childrearing tasks are why the transition to parenthood is more detrimental for women than for men (for reviews see Cox, 1985; Demo & Cox, 2000; Glenn, 1990; Veroff et al., 1997). This implies that the same transition to parenthood may yield more negative changes in feelings of well-being for women than men. In this paper, we will therefore study the impact of becoming a parent on well-being separately for women and men.

## **4.3 Method**

### *4.3.1 Data*

Our analyses are based on two waves of data from the public release file of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS). The NKPS is a large scale panel survey on family ties, which started in 2002 among a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 79 residing in private households in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2005). The data were collected by means of computer assisted interview schedules. Data from the first wave were collected between 2002 and 2003. The overall response rate of the first wave was 45 % , which is lower than in comparable surveys in other Western countries, but similar to comparable large-scale family surveys in the Netherlands (De Leeuw & De Heer, 2001; Dykstra et al., 2005). The Dutch appear to be particularly sensitive about privacy issues. The second wave was conducted between 2006 and 2007. The overall response rate of the second wave was 74 %. The cooperation rate for the second wave (excluding respondents who were too ill to participate, respondents who moved abroad or deceased in between the waves) was 84 %. Men are somewhat underrepresented in the main sample, the same holds for individuals aged 20 up to 30. Men and women who live alone are also underrepresented, whereas married individuals and individuals with children are overrepresented. Data were used from main respondents only, not their partners. The men and women in the study form independent samples.

Our sample consists of 338 childless women under 40 and 262 childless men under 45 at the time of the first interview who had one and the same partner between the waves. We exclude older respondents because they are unlikely to make the transition to parenthood. An inclusion of childless individuals who do not make the transition to parenthood in our sample is required to find out whether changes in well-being occur even without the birth of a child, as a number of longitudinal studies on couples have shown that marital satisfaction levels change independent of the birth of a child (McHale & Huston, 1985; White & Booth, 1985).

#### 4.3.2 Analyses

We use fixed effects models to analyze our data. Fixed effects models have been used widely by econometricians to analyze panel data, but they have received limited attention in sociology (Allison, 1994). We use the fixed effects model to deal with the problem of unobserved individual heterogeneity. Under the fixed effects specification, the error term is uncorrelated with the controlled explanatory variables assuming that the unobserved individual characteristics do not change over time, and OLS estimators are consistent. The models contain individual-specific constant terms as explanatory variables, which absorb observed or unobserved time-invariant characteristics. Differences between individuals that do not vary over time, such as biological or genetic differences, and also selection biases, are controlled for (Allison, 1994; Johnson, 1995; 2005). Time-invariant characteristics that vary across but not within individuals, such as race, only enter the analysis as modifiers. A fixed effects approach utilizes only the within variations (the over-time changes in the values of variables for an individual) but not the between variations (the differences in the levels of variables across individuals) in estimation. This is a cost it bears to eliminate the inconsistency issue caused by unobserved individual characteristics (Johnson, 2005).

In addition to eliminating unobserved heterogeneity, the fixed effects model is also conceptually well suited for our analyses because it uses *changes* in the independent variables to predict *changes* in the dependent variable. More specifically, the purpose of the analysis is to analyze the effect of a change in parental status on changes in subjective well-being. To be able to conduct fixed effects time series analyses, we created a person-period file, with two observations (one observation for each wave) per variable per person. To test whether the estimates would suffer from omitted variables bias, we ran Hausman (1978) tests which compare random effects models with the fixed effects models to see how problematic the absence of omitted characteristics is. If the Hausman test statistic is significantly large, one must use a fixed effects model. If the statistic is nonsignificant, it is acceptable to use a random effects model.

### 4.3.3 Measures

*Life satisfaction* is measured by the Diener's Life satisfaction scale (Diener, Emmons, Larsen, & Griffin, 1985). Summed scores range from 4 = *least satisfied with life* up to 20 = *most satisfied with life*. An example of a scale item is: "My life is ideal in most respects."

*Loneliness* is measured by the Loneliness scale of De Jong Gierveld and Kamphuis (1985). The scale consists of five positive and six negative items. Items are coded in such a way that higher scores indicate greater loneliness. Summed scores range from 11 = *not at all lonely* up to 33 = *very lonely*. An example of a scale item is: "There is always someone I can talk to about my day-to-day problems".

*Positive daily affect* is the positive item from the five-item Mental Health Index scale MHI-5 (Berwick et al., 1991) measured by the question: "How often have you felt happy in the past four weeks?", ranging from 1 = *not at all happy* up to 6 = *very happy*.

*Negative daily affect* consists of the three negative items from the MHI-5 scale (Berwick et al., 1991), with a score ranging from 3 = *no negative affect* to 18 = *high negative affect*. An example of a scale item is: "How often have you felt particularly tense in the past four weeks?".

*Partner conflicts* are measured by five items. The scale score ranges from 5 = *not at all* up to 15 = *high conflict*. This scale was developed for the 1998 'Divorce in the Netherlands' study (Kalmijn, Graaf, & Uunk, 2000). An example of a scale item is: "Were there in the past 12 months heated discussions between you and your partner"?

*Partnership satisfaction* has a sum score ranging from 4 = *lowest* up to 20 = *highest*. The scale was developed for the NKPS. An example of a scale item is: "We have a good relationship". The partnership satisfaction variable had a ceiling effect and thus a negative skew that is not uncommon in the relationship literature (see Johnson, 2002). Therefore, we completed a log transformation that resulted in an acceptable distribution in terms of normality.

*Parental status* is measured by a dichotomous variable indicating whether a respondent became the parent of a biological child (score 1) or whether he or she remained childless (score 0). Although the impact of making the transition to parenthood is not restricted to biological ties to children — research shows that becoming a parent of an adopted child or of a stepchild may have a strong impact on people's psychological well-being (Ishii-Kuntz & Ihinger-Tallman, 1991; Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006) — in this paper we only focus on the impact of becoming a biological parent. Given the low numbers, childless respondents who adopted a child between both waves ( $n = 2$ ) and childless respondents who became stepparents between both waves ( $n = 33$ ) were excluded from the analyses. Finally, ten respondents, of whom six were pregnant and four had partners who were pregnant at the first wave interview, were excluded from the analyses, as research has shown that the

nature of the relationship and feelings of well-being already have changed dramatically once the woman is pregnant (Boyce, Condon, Barton, & Corkindale, 2007). 38 per cent of women ( $n = 130$ ) and 37 per cent of men ( $n = 98$ ) in our final sample make the transition to parenthood

We include time-varying measures of partner status and work hours. For both waves, we use a variable partner status that reflects whether respondents were living apart together, meaning whether respondents were in a steady dating non-cohabiting relationship (LAT), whether they were cohabiting unmarried, in a registered partnership, or married. To be able to examine whether a change in partner status affects feelings of well-being, we include partner status transitions in our model. A number of transitions were rare and for that reason combined into larger categories. For example, the transition from living apart together to a cohabiting union and the transition from living apart together to being married were combined into the transition from living apart together to living together. We use two dummies for partner status transitions: moving from living apart together to living together (= LAT- *together*) and moving from unmarried cohabitation to marriage (= *cohabitation - marriage*),

*Work hours.* Information on work hours is delineated via the question: “How many hours a week on average do you work? That is to say, actual hours worked”. When a respondent had several jobs, the numbers of hours of these jobs were summed. Respondents, who did not have a job at the time of the interview, were assigned 0 hours of work. Women who were on maternity leave filled in the numbers of hours they worked according to their contract. To be able to examine whether a change in work hours affects feelings of well-being, we include work hour transitions in our model. We use four dummy variables indicating: *becoming employed, increasing the number of hours working, decreasing the number of hours working, and stopped working*. Given the low numbers of individuals who started to work, they were placed under the category increasing the number of hours working. Finally, given the small number of men who stopped working, they are placed under the category decreasing the number of hours working.

Table 4.1 shows the means, standard deviations and ranges for all our variables. Table 4.2 shows the number of respondents making various transitions in partner status and work hours. We enter the variables in two steps into our analyses. The first model only includes becoming a parent as an independent variable. The second model also includes the control variables transitions in partner status and in work hours. We first show results for female, then for male respondents.

**Table 4.1** Descriptive statistics

Variables	Women ( <i>n</i> = 338)	Women who make the transition to parenthood ( <i>n</i> = 130)	Men ( <i>n</i> = 262)	Men who make the transition to parenthood ( <i>n</i> = 98)	Range	Cron- bach's Alpha
Satisfaction with life Time 1	15.6 (2.5)	15.9 (2.4)	15.5 (2.5)	15.9 (2.4)	4 - 20	0.83
Satisfaction with life Time 2	15.7 (2.5)	15.9 (2.5)	15.4 (2.6)	15.6 (2.5)	4 - 20	0.85
Loneliness Time 1	13.5 (3.5)	13.3 (3.5)	13.0 (2.7)	12.8 (2.6)	11 - 33	0.87
Loneliness Time 2	13.8 (3.9)	13.7 (3.9)	13.6 (3.1)	13.4 (3.4)	11 - 33	0.87
Positive affect Time 1	4.6 (0.9)	4.6 (0.9)	4.6 (0.9)	4.7 (0.8)	1 - 6	n.a.
Positive affect Time 2	4.5 (1.0)	4.6 (0.8)	4.5 (0.9)	4.5 (0.9)	1 - 6	n.a.
Negative affect Time 1	6.2 (2.1)	6.1 (1.9)	5.4 (1.8)	5.3 (1.7)	3 - 18	0.76
Negative affect Time 2	6.0 (2.1)	5.8 (2.0)	5.6 (2.0)	5.3 (1.9)	3 - 18	0.77
Conflicts with partner Time 1	6.4 (1.3)	6.5 (1.4)	6.6 (1.6)	6.7 (1.5)	5 - 15	0.70
Conflicts with partner Time 2	6.7 (1.5)	6.8 (1.6)	6.9 (1.4)	6.8 (1.4)	5 - 15	0.68
Log of Partnership satisfaction Time 1	2.9 (0.1)	2.9 (0.1)	2.9 (0.2)	2.9 (0.1)	1.4 - 3.0	0.76
Log of Partnership satisfaction Time 2	2.9 (0.2)	2.9 (0.2)	2.9 (0.2)	2.9 (0.2)	1.4 - 3.0	0.77

**Table 4.2** Number of respondents making various partner status and work hour transitions

Variables	Women	Women who make the transition to parenthood	Men	Men who make the transition to parenthood
LAT – together	66 (20 %)	22 (17 %)	42 (16 %)	6 (6 %)
Cohabitation – marriage	91 (27 %)	52 (40 %)	72 (27 %)	34 (35 %)
No change in marital status	181 (53 %)	56 (43 %)	148 (57 %)	58 (59 %)
Increase hours of work	111 (33 %)	18 (14 %)	141 (54 %)	45 (46 %)
Decrease hours of work	115 (34 %)	84 (65 %)	52 (20 %)	29 (30 %)
Stopped working	34 (10 %)	23 (18 %)	19 (7 %) <sup>a</sup>	3 (3 %) <sup>a</sup>
No change in work hours	78 (23 %)	5 (3 %)	50 (19 %)	21 (21 %)

<sup>a</sup> placed under the category ‘decrease hours of work’

## 4.4 Results

The first three sets of columns in Table 4.3 inform us that the transition to parenthood does not affect women's life satisfaction, feelings of loneliness, nor positive affect respectively. The incorporation of partner status and work hour transitions leads to a better model fit only for life satisfaction. However, none of these transitions have a significant impact on how satisfied women report to be. With the inclusion of partner status and work hour transitions, the coefficient for entering motherhood becomes negative, but not significant. The first direct impact of the transition to parenthood on women's well-being is found for negative affect. Entering parenthood makes women report significantly less negative affect. The inclusion of our control variables in Model 2 improves our model fit significantly. Increasing one's hours of work decreases feelings of negative affect. With the inclusion of our control variables, the coefficient for entering motherhood loses significance. Finally, the Hausman-test indicates that the use of a fixed effects model is necessary. In additional analyses (not shown) we entered partner status and work hour transitions in separate steps into our model. These results indicate that the impact of making the transition to parenthood is attributable to increasing the hours a woman works. This suggests that the entry into motherhood decreases negative affect for women via the increase in the hours women work, because of the well-being benefits of a firm embedment in a role and an identity which are independent from that of being a mother.

The final two sets of columns focus on partnership well-being. Model 1 of the fifth set of columns shows that entering motherhood significantly increases the number of conflicts women have with their partner. In Model 2 we include our control variables, and this inclusion improves our model fit significantly. The coefficient for entering motherhood loses significance when partner status and work hour transitions are considered. Going from a LAT-relationship to living together increases the number of conflicts women have with their partner. The Hausman-test indicates that the use of a fixed effects model is necessary. In additional analyses (not shown) we entered partner status and work hour transitions in separate steps into our model. These results indicate that the impact of making the transition to parenthood on the number of conflicts with one's partner is attributable to making the transition to living together with one's partner. This suggests that becoming a mother increases the number of conflicts with one's partner mainly because starting to live together, and adjusting to the new household situation, increases the number of conflicts with one's partner. Looking at the last set of columns in Table 3, we find that making the transition to parenthood has a significant negative impact on partnership satisfaction among women. The difference becomes insignificant when partner status and work hour transitions are taken into account in Model 2. The inclusion of control variables improves the model fit significantly. Partner status transitions have no impact on women's

partnership satisfaction, but women who stop working become less satisfied with their partnership. The Hausman-test indicates that the use of a fixed effects model is necessary. In additional analyses (not shown) we entered partner status and work hour transitions in separate steps into our model. These results indicate that the detrimental impact of making the transition to parenthood on partnership satisfaction is indeed attributable to quitting one's job. This suggests that entering motherhood decreases partnership satisfaction because of women's loss of their work role. The birth of a baby confines the mother, at least in the early period, to her home, and this is strengthened through the loss of her work role. This situation may give tensions at home and may therefore decrease women's partnership satisfaction.

In Table 4.4, we shift our attention to men. In Model 1 of the first set of columns in Table 4 we find that entering fatherhood does not significantly affect men's life satisfaction. In Model 2 we include partner status and work hour transitions. None of these transitions have a significant impact on men's feelings of life satisfaction. The inclusion of our control variables does not improve our model fit significantly. Finally, the Hausman-test indicates that a random-effects model suffices. We do find a significant impact of entering fatherhood on personal well-being when we turn to feelings of loneliness in the second set of columns of Table 4.4. Model 1 shows that the transition to parenthood significantly increases men's feelings of loneliness. The inclusion of our control variables in Model 2 leads to a significantly better model fit. Men who legitimize their cohabiting relationship become significantly lonelier. With the inclusion of our control variables, the impact of entering fatherhood loses significance. The Hausman-test indicates that the use of a fixed effects model is necessary. In additional analyses (not shown) we entered partner status and work hour transitions in separate steps into our model. These results indicate that the detrimental impact of making the transition to parenthood on loneliness is attributable to the transition from a cohabiting relationship to being married. This suggests that the arrival of a child leads to a stronger focus on the couple relationship and the triad of husband, wife and child. This may lead to isolation from friends and colleagues, which may give new fathers heightened feelings of loneliness. In the third set of columns, we look at daily positive affect. We find that entering fatherhood decreases feelings of positive affect, but this effect is only just significant. In Model 2 we include partner status and work hour transitions, and this addition improves the model fit significantly. However, none of the partner status and work hour transitions have a significant impact on men's positive affect. However, with the inclusion of our control variables, the impact of making the transition to parenthood loses significance. Finally, Hausman-tests reveal that fixed effects models are necessary. Looking at the fourth set of columns in Table 4.4, we find that making the transition to parenthood does not have a significant impact on men's feelings of negative affect. The inclusion of control variables in Model 2 improves the model fit significantly.

**Table 4.3** Fixed effects analyses for women (n = 338)

	Life satisfaction				Loneliness				Positive affect			
	M1		M2		M1		M2		M1		M2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Become parent	0.04	0.21	-0.36	0.34	0.23	0.31	0.17	0.50	-0.05	0.09	-0.05	0.14
LAT – together			0.46	0.35			-0.12	0.49			-0.06	0.14
Cohabitation -marriage			0.56	0.32			-0.02	0.46			-0.04	0.13
Decrease hours of work			0.16	0.34			-0.11	0.49			0.10	0.14
Increase hours of work			0.15	0.27			0.56	0.40			0.07	0.11
Stopped working			-0.04	0.48			0.56	0.68			-0.31	0.20
Constant	15.65	0.08	15.56	0.09	13.58	0.11	13.51	0.13	4.56	0.03	4.56	0.38
Hausman			12.99*				3.21				5.67	
Likelihood-ratio test			17.28**				6.53				10.16	

*Note* \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

**Table 4.3** (continued) Fixed effects analyses for women (n = 338)

	Negative affect				Partner conflict				Partnership satisfaction			
	M1		M1		M1		M2		M1		M2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Become parent	-0.27*	0.11	-0.11	0.31	0.28**	0.12	0.05	0.18	-0.03*	0.01	-0.02	0.02
LAT – together			0.26	0.31			0.62**	0.20			-0.02	0.02
Cohabitation -marriage			-0.04	0.29			-0.24	0.18			0.01	0.02
Decrease hours of work			-0.22	0.31			0.23	0.19			0.01	0.02
Increase hours of work			-0.52*	0.24			0.15	0.16			-0.03	0.02
Stopped working			0.07	0.43			0.41	0.27			-0.08*	0.03
Constant	6.13	0.07	6.19	0.08	6.51	0.05	6.43	0.05	2.92	0.01	2.92	0.01
Hausman			26.63*				16.30*				15.14*	
Likelihood-ratio test			12.78*				35.44***				26.50***	

Note \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.4** Fixed effect analyses for men (n = 262)

	Life satisfaction				Loneliness				Positive affect			
	M1		M2		M1		M2		M1		M2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Become parent	-0.40	0.26	-0.36	0.32	0.54*	0.26	0.07	0.32	-0.19*	0.09	-0.15	0.12
LAT – together			0.70	0.46			0.39	0.48			0.21	0.17
Cohabitation -marriage			0.05	0.37			0.76*	0.38			-0.13	0.14
Decrease hours of work			-0.11	0.42			0.43	0.43			0.19	0.16
Increase hours of work			-0.14	0.28			0.19	0.29			-0.04	0.10
Constant	15.53	0.06	15.51	0.11	13.21	0.08	13.08	0.11	4.59	0.03	4.59	0.04
Hausman				7.36				9.67*				14.06**
Likelihood-ratio test				5.15				21.99***				9.13*

*Note* \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

**Table 4.4** (continued) Fixed effect analyses for men (n = 262)

	Negative affect				Partner conflict				Partnership satisfaction			
	M1		M2		M1		M2		M1		M2	
	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>
Become parent	0.06	0.21	-0.06	0.26	0.23	0.15	0.23	0.18	-0.05*	0.02	-0.04	0.03
LAT – together			-0.43	0.39			0.75**	0.28			0.01	0.04
Cohabitation -marriage			0.52*	0.21			0.09	0.22			-0.02	0.03
Decrease hours of work			-0.04	0.35			-0.23	0.25			0.02	0.04
Increase hours of work			-0.04	0.22			-0.02	0.16			0.02	0.03
Constant	5.44	0.08	5.44	0.09	6.71	0.05	6.67	0.06	2.90	0.01	2.89	0.01
Hausman			9.83*				9.70*				9.26	
Likelihood-ratio test			8.20*				19.05***				1.87	

Note \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

The transition from going to a cohabiting relationship to a marriage increases feelings of negative affect for men. With the inclusion of our control variables, the impact of entering fatherhood on negative affect becomes a beneficial one, but this effect is not significant. The Hausman-test indicates that the use of a fixed effects model is necessary

In the last two sets of columns we focus on partnership well-being. We find that entering fatherhood does not have a significant influence on the number of partner conflicts. The inclusion of control variables significantly improves model fit. Partner status transitions affect the number of conflicts men have with their partner. Men who start living together with their partner report significantly more conflicts. Finally, the Hausman-test reveals that the use of a fixed effects model is necessary. Looking at the last set of columns in Table 4.4, Model 1, we find that making the transition to parenthood significantly decreases men's partnership satisfaction. In Model 2 we include the control variables. The addition of these factors improves our model fit significantly. However, none of the separate factors have a significant impact on men's partnership satisfaction. But when these factors are taken into account, the coefficient for becoming a father loses significance. Finally, the Hausman-test indicates that a random-effects model suffices.

## **4.5 Discussion**

The literature on the transition to parenthood has shifted from a focus on what the consequences of entering parenthood are, to under which conditions parenthood has consequences for people's feelings of well-being. Our analyses contribute to the literature by incorporating two specific types of changing conditions in new parents' lives: partner status and work hour transitions.

Our results reveal an effect of the transition to parenthood on only half of our outcome measures, and insofar effects were observed, their magnitude is small. Nevertheless, our results are noteworthy for a variety of reasons, the most important being the nature of the well-being constructs under investigation. In this study, unlike many that examine the impact of the transition to parenthood, the focus of inquiry is on change in feelings of well-being across the transition to parenthood. By focusing upon change in, rather than absolute levels of, well-being, we greatly restricted the variance available for prediction, but, in doing so, were able to accurately document how the transition to parenthood and changes in other life domains influence feelings of well-being.

Our central premise was that changes in partner status and work hours associated with becoming a parent would be responsible for changes in well-being. In line with this idea, findings show that the loss of the work role is among the factors contributing to a decrease in new mothers' partnership satisfaction. Furthermore, not the arrival of a child, but rather the transition to living together intensifies arguments with one's partner. In general, our

results show that changes in partner status and work hours account for the impact of entering parenthood on well-being.

Previous work has consistently shown that making the transition to parenthood negatively affects partnership quality (Belsky & Pensky, 1988; Cox, 1985; Huston & Vangelisti, 1995; Lawrence, Cobb, Rothman, Rothman, & Bradbury, 2008). The general understanding in the literature is that conflict and dissatisfaction arise because of increasing gender differences between partners. With the arrival of a baby come rearrangements of old patterns. Recent studies have shown that changes in the division of household tasks (Kluwer, Heesink, & Van de Vliert, 2002) and leisure time (Nomaguchi & Bianchi, 2004) account for altered feelings of well-being of new parents. Our study adds to the literature by showing that transitions in work hours and in partner status, which often precede changes in household tasks and leisure time, matter for women and men's adaptation to first time parenthood.

With the arrival of a first child, many couples strengthen the commitment in their relationship; they start living together or legitimize their cohabiting relationship. Our data reveal that these rearrangements are attributable for decreases in new parents' well-being in two occasions; increased numbers of conflicts are attributable to the transition to living together with their partner for new mothers, while increased feelings of loneliness are attributable to legitimizing the cohabiting relationship for new fathers. Rearrangements in work hours also play a substantial role, but only for women, which may not come as a surprise as mainly women rather than men cut down in their work hours after their first child is born. In contrast to the idea of being overloaded by combining the roles of mother, partner, friend and coworker (Coverman, 1989), our results suggest that being employed and working a substantial amount of hours is beneficial for women's well-being; decreased levels of partnership well-being among women are mainly due to the transition out of employment. Furthermore, decreased feelings of negative affect are mainly due to an increase in the hours new mothers work.

Our results confirm previous findings in that the impact of entering parenthood is not uniform across well-being measures. We find that the transition to parenthood has no impact on our cognitive evaluations of well-being, with the exception of an increase in loneliness for men. The findings on daily mood are mixed, showing that new mothers express more negative, but not less positive affect, whereas the results are exactly opposite for men. These results are in line with previous work which suggested that women are more prone to report negative, and men are more likely to report positive changes (Simon & Nath, 2004). Our results therefore emphasize the importance of a separate focus on women and men when focusing on well-being. Most evidence of the impact of entering parenthood on well-being is found when we look at partnership well-being and the results

strongly reveal a detrimental impact on conjugal life. In sum, our results suggest that babies are less fulfilling to partners than to persons.

Our focus on multiple outcomes of well-being shows that entering parenthood can be both a joy and a tribulation for women, although the balance tips over to the detrimental side. For men, we only find evidence for the gloomy side of parenthood. This absence of positive change might be related to the phase of parenthood investigated in this study. On average, the interviews with our respondents were a little over 3 years apart. Children of the respondents who became parents between waves are below 2.5 years of age. The early years of parenthood are probably the most difficult ones in a parent's life, during which most adjustments have to be made (Miller & Sollie, 1980). A more rosy view might have emerged if we had been able to extend our view to include primary-school age children.

With some recent exceptions (e.g. Kaitz & Katzir, 2004; Kluwer & Johnson, 2007), most studies that observe both mother's and father's adjustment to parenthood, find that the transition is more detrimental for women (Cowan et al., 1985; Feldman & Nash, 1984; Harriman, 1983; Miller & Sollie, 1980; Wallace & Gotlib, 1990). Our inquiry shows a different pattern. This might be related to differences in the time frame one looks at. Work by Cowan et al (1985) provides useful insights here. Their work shows that the impact of becoming a parent is felt first by women. "Her transition involves a radical shift from the world of work to home, with a significant larger portion of her self devoted to the care and nurturing of the baby. His transition begins more slowly, first putting him in touch with the father's role as provider. Only later do men feel the negative effects that have been reported for several decades in new mothers" (p. 477). In general, previous studies have mostly looked at the first couple of months or the first year of parenthood (Claxton & Perry-Jenkins, 2008; Feldman & Nash, 1984; Fleming et al., 1990; Kaitz & Katzir, 2004; Lawrence et al., 2008; Lawrence et al., 2007; Levy-Shiff, 1994; Miller & Sollie, 1980; Russell, 1974; Wallace & Gotlib, 1990). In this period, especially women experience multiple and radical role changes: They take on parental leave, are often primarily responsible for newborn care, and do most of the household tasks (Baxter et al., 2008; Hynes & Clarkberg, 2005; Kluwer et al., 2002). The time frame of our study is expanded beyond these initial months of possible glow and trauma and our study reveals that, when applying a larger time frame, men are just as affected by the transition to parenthood as women. Studies that focus on the even longer-term consequences of fatherhood come up with the same conclusion: That having children has a substantial impact on men's well-being (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006).

Besides differences in time frames, differences in contexts may have also evoked different results when comparing our findings with those of previous work. There are benefits of being a new parent in the Netherlands which may alleviate some of the emotional and physical strains associated with the transition to parenthood. For example, in

the Netherlands, all women, whether they are employed or not, are awarded 16 weeks of maternity leave. A recent study by Feldman, Sussman and Zigler (2004) shows that a short maternity leave, meaning less than 12 weeks, is related to poorer adaptation during the transition to parenthood. This might explain why our findings on negative affect run counter to most studies on this topic that show increased distress among new mothers. Furthermore, all parents in the Netherlands can benefit from easy access to free, neighborhood well-baby clinics. Finally, in the Netherlands, there are incentives for mothers to (re)enter the work force, as double-income parents receive substantial tax benefits that alleviate the costs of bringing their child to a day care center. This may help explain why we find that feelings of negative affect decrease when new mothers increase the numbers of hours they work.

It is unclear whether selective attrition has affected our results. If, for example, highly distressed new parents were more likely to drop out of the study, then negative effects of parenthood are likely underestimated and positive effects are likely overestimated. Furthermore, we might be underestimating the negative consequences of the transition to parenthood, as our analyses were restricted to those who were continuously partnered between waves. New parents who broke up between waves were not considered. Becoming a parent is a greater challenge and entails greater costs for those who are single in comparison to those who have a partner (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). Therefore, our findings might actually underestimate the difficulties of entering parenthood.

In conclusion, the transition to parenthood requires reorganization and accommodation. In this paper, we have taken a close look at the first years of parenthood, finding that transitions in partner status and work hours account for the impact —albeit modest— of entering parenthood on well-being. Given that men and women enter parenthood with different starting points, they are differentially affected by the transition, at different points in time, and with different intensities. Future research should make use of longitudinal data that span a large number of years and incorporate multiple time points, in order to thoroughly examine the processes through which costs and benefits ebb and flow in mothers' and fathers' life courses. Furthermore, the successfulness of the adaptation to becoming a parent, and with that the impact on well-being, is determined by the effectiveness of the efforts of both partners to meet the challenging changes that come with entering parenthood. For a deeper understanding of how parenthood does, and does not, affect the adult lives of individuals, it is important that future research not only pays attention to individual transitions, but to that of the couple.

# Chapter 5

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## Life outcomes of childless men and fathers<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This chapter was co-authored with Prof. Dr. Pearl A. Dykstra and Dr. Anne-Rigt Poortman. A slightly different version of this paper is accepted for publication in *European Sociological Review*. Earlier versions of this chapter were presented at the national sociology conference (Dag van de Sociologie), May 2007, Rotterdam and at the European Sociological Association conference, September 2007, Glasgow.



## 5.1 Introduction

Being a parent is seen as at the core of having a normal adult life (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007b). Research on childlessness has been colored by this notion. In the literature, the childless are depicted as others, as deviants (Letherby, 2002). Such stereotypes are found in contemporary work, though they were more powerful a few decades ago. Moreover, the childless are seen as disadvantaged. It is typically assumed that the childless have weak or tenuous ties to others; that they are marginal in support networks, their neighborhood and community and in society at large (Akerlof, 1998).

Given that being a parent is considered to be more central in the lives of women than in those of men (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2003; Hird & Abshoff, 2000; Letherby, 2002; Veevers, 1980), the ramifications of not having entered the parental role are generally assumed to be more disadvantageous for childless women than for childless men. As a consequence, most studies have examined the impact of childlessness for women and have neglected men (Greene & Biddlecom, 2000). This is an unfortunate omission in the literature, because it overlooks men's role in families, which traditionally has been the good provider (Becker, 1991; Bernard, 1981). Recent studies have concluded that breadwinning is still an important component of men's fathering identity and men's main form of commitment to family life (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001; Hatten et al., 2002; Warin et al., 1999). Without children, the enactment of this role becomes less relevant for men.

To reach an understanding of the impact of childlessness on men's life outcomes we focus on the ways in which fatherhood structures men's lives. By using life course structuring as an overarching framework, we aim to uncover what it is about having children that matters in how well men fare.

Two views exist. Some scholars have argued that fatherhood has a lasting influence on men's lives (Palkovitz, 2002; Snarey, 1993). It transforms them: Becoming a father is thought to lead to permanent changes with respect to men's behavior and well-being. Others have suggested that the impact of fatherhood is quite restricted; structuring men's lives only to the extent that they actively occupy fathering roles (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006; Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006). To find out whether the childless differ from fathers because they have not made the transition to fatherhood or because they are not actively involved with their children, we make comparisons between permanently childless men, resident and non-resident fathers. We use co-residence as the indicator of active involvement.

Comparisons between these three groups are scarce. In the transition to parenthood literature, researchers put young men who might still make the transition to parenthood in the childless category. So, in these research designs, permanently childless men and 'not

yet fathers' are not distinguished (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003; Umberson & Gove, 1989). Moreover, parenthood has empirically often been reduced to having children in the household; comparisons are made between adults living with children and those who have no children in their households (for reviews see Kendig et al., 2007; McLanahan & Adams, 1987). In such research designs, the childless are placed in the same category as are empty-nesters. As a result, life-long childlessness and no longer having children living at home are not distinguished.

An important consideration is that partnership history rather than parental status accounts for differences between childless men and fathers. The literature shows that especially men benefit from marriage (Nock, 1998; Waite, 1995). It may be the case that fathers are advantaged because they are more likely partnered in comparison to childless men. In previous studies, this question has only scarcely been addressed, because researchers have not disentangled effects of parenthood from effects of partnership history. Recent research on the impact of childlessness in old age has shown that parenthood differences were partly attributable to marital history; few effects of parenthood were found independent of marital history (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Kendig et al., 2007; Wenger, Dykstra, Melkas, & Knipscheer, 2007).

In this paper we want to improve upon previous research, and more specifically to reach an understanding of why childless men might differ from fathers. To do so, we compare permanently childless men with resident and non-resident fathers and we explicitly take men's partnership history into account. As studies on the impact of parenthood, although not explicitly focusing on men, have shown that the consequences are not necessarily uniform across life domains (Dykstra & Wagner, 2007; Kendig et al., 2007; Wenger et al., 2007), we take four different life domains into consideration; namely social activities, health, economic activities and psychological well-being. As a result, we hope to identify when childlessness matters for men's life outcomes and when it does not. Our analyses are based on data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS), a nationally representative survey, conducted in 2002-2004, from which we selected 1451 men aged 40 up to 59.

## **5.2 Theoretical background and hypothesis**

### *5.2.1 The structuring influence of fatherhood*

The transition to parenthood is one of the most significant role transitions in the life course of an individual (Clausen, 1986; Feeney et al., 2001). Parenthood is a key organizer of the life course (Hagestad & Call, 2007). There are normative expectations for how parents should act and behave, and many of these are laid down in laws (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007a; 2007b). Parenthood introduces new opportunities and simultaneously

restricts engagement in specific life domains (Elder, 1985; Hagestad, 1990). We pose that the structuring influence of fatherhood in men's lives can be captured by five mechanism

First of all, the fulfillment of the role of father takes time. Children create substantial demands on parents' time (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003). The limits on time imply that fathers spend less time on activities beyond childrearing than do childless men. We refer to the mechanism as *the organization of time*. Not all activities are equally affected by the reduction in free-available time. Fatherhood creates new and enhances existing ties to individuals, and facilitates social activities that revolve around children. Parents often make new acquaintances through their children, as these create common grounds for the interaction between their parents and other adults (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). This is the second mechanism, which we call *quantity of social engagement opportunities*. Third, we pose that fatherhood *orders men's priorities*. Fatherhood shapes men's lives by confronting them with opportunities to sort out what is important to them in life (Snarey, 1993). Fatherhood makes goals in life important that transcend the individual self (Barnett et al., 1992; Dykstra, 2006b; Furstenberg, 2005). We therefore argue that fatherhood makes men prioritize relationships and activities that benefit their children. Fourth, fatherhood shapes men's lives via *social control*, as the role of father entails certain obligations. By law, parents must not only provide their children with the essentials of daily living such as food and shelter, but also provide socialization for their children's future adult lives (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007a). There are socially-shared expectations about proper behavior of fathers. We therefore argue that fatherhood pressures men to set a proper example for their children (Umberson, 1987). The final mechanism concerns *sources of daily stress/joy*. One view is that parents are subject to problems in their lives that the childless do not have, such as worries, responsibilities and daily strains of having children (Koropecj-Cox, 2002; McLanahan & Adams, 1987; Pillemer & Suitor, 1991). The opposing view is that parenthood is a unique source of pleasure. Life course theory suggests that occupying the normatively expected social status of parenthood creates a sense of meaning and fulfillment. Furthermore, parents enjoy benefits that the childless do not have, such as the joy of seeing children grow up, personal growth and the opportunity for nurturance.

The abovementioned mechanisms are not mutually exclusive. Neither are they specific to a specific life outcome. In what follows, we focus on social activities (i.e. personal leisure, contact with parents, contact with neighbors and community involvement), health, economic activities (i.e. income and work hours) and psychological well-being (i.e. life satisfaction and daily mood), and describe the ways in which they might be subject to the structuring influence of parenthood. Note that our theoretical framework assumes that fatherhood creates changes in men's lives. Of course, men who become fathers might be a distinct group from the start. We return to the issue of causation in the conclusion.

The five mechanisms underlying the structuring influence of fatherhood mostly pertain to differences between childless men and resident fathers. We therefore expect that childless men mostly, or only, differ from resident fathers and that there will be no, or only small differences between childless men and non-resident fathers. We take this into account when formulating our hypotheses below.

*Social activities.* Guided by the organization of time, the quantity of social engagement opportunities and the ordering of priorities perspectives, we argue that permanent childlessness is associated with a strong involvement in personal leisure activities and a weak involvement with family members, neighbors and the community. As children create substantial demands on parents' time (Nomaguchi & Milkie, 2003), we argue that having children restricts time for leisure activities, especially activities that do not revolve around children, such as going out with friends, or going out in the evening. Conversely, we argue that having children expands activities that revolve around children: contact with family members, neighbors and community involvement. Children facilitate contact with family members (Gallagher & Gerstel, 2001), and fathers are likely to invest in family contacts so their children can benefit from childcare and support. In the neighborhood, children connect their parents to other parents via the contacts with playmates (Furstenberg, 2005). Fathers are also likely to be involved in the community, as such engagement benefits their children by securing safe living environments and the availability of youth facilities (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007b). The above leads to the following hypotheses: *In comparison to resident fathers, childless men are more involved in personal leisure activities, but less involved with their family members, neighbors and in their community. In comparison to non-resident fathers, childless men are not more or only slightly more involved in personal leisure activities, and not less or only slightly less involved with their family members, with neighbors and in their community.*

*Health.* Guided by both the ordering of priorities perspective and the level of social control perspective, we argue that permanent childlessness is associated with poor health. The rationale is that fathers have healthier lives than childless men, because they are motivated to provide their children a good future (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001). Fathers are also expected to set a proper example for their children. Fatherhood is therefore seen to "civilize" men by reducing their involvement in unhealthy behavior (Akerlof, 1998). This leads to the following hypotheses: *In comparison to resident fathers, childless men are less healthy. In comparison to non-resident fathers, childless men are not or only slightly less healthy.*

*Economic activities.* From the organization of time, the ordering of priorities and the level of social control perspectives, opposing views can be derived for the impact of permanent

childlessness on men's work hours and level of income. Based on the time perspective, childless men are likely to spend more time on work in comparison to fathers. Based on the social control perspective, childless men are expected to exhibit a weaker commitment to their work and earn less money in comparison to fathers. The rationale is that society expects fathers to be good providers for their children. From the ordering of priorities perspective, two expectations can be derived concerning men's level of income and work hours. The first is based on the good provider role and poses that fatherhood tends to increase men's level of income and their work effort. The rationale is that when men assume responsibility for providing economically for their families, the increased costs of supporting children should lead fathers to work more than childless men (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000). The second concerns responsible fatherhood and states that becoming a father motivates men to reduce the number of hours they work outside the home. The rationale is that men will spend less time on work because they want to be involved in nurturing and rearing their children (Kaufman & Uhlenberg, 2000). Previous research has consistently shown, however, that fathers have higher incomes and work more hours a week in comparison to childless men (Bielenksi, Bosch, & Wagner, 2002; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001; Ellingseter, 1990; Lundberg & Rose, 2002). The above leads to the following hypotheses: *In comparison to resident fathers, childless men earn less money and work fewer hours a week. In comparison to non-resident fathers, childless men do not or earn only slightly less money and do not work less or only work slightly fewer hours a week.*

*Psychological well-being.* Guided by the organization of time perspective we argue that childless men have higher levels of well-being in comparison to fathers, because the latter experience a reduction in personal and couple leisure time, which influences their well-being negatively (see for a review Demo & Cox, 2000). Guided by the sources of stress/joy perspective, we argue that childlessness has both advantages and disadvantages for men's well-being. We expect that the relevance of these mechanisms, and the balance of joy versus stress, depends upon the outcome under study. Scholars have argued that the assessment of individuals' psychological well-being involves both a cognitive overall evaluation and some degree of daily positive and/or negative feeling (Andrews & Withey, 1976; Crooker & Near, 1998; Pavot & Diener, 1993). Therefore, we use two separate measures of well-being in our analyses, namely overall satisfaction with life and daily mood. Taking the above into consideration, we expect that having children has a positive impact on men's satisfaction with life and a negative impact on their daily mood. The rationale is that fathers may feel that their daily lives have become more stressful and that they have restricted time for personal and couple leisure. Simultaneously, in the long run, fathers may feel they have personally grown and see their lives as fulfilled by having

children. This leads to the following hypotheses: *In comparison to resident fathers, childless men have lower levels of life satisfaction, but higher levels of daily mood. In comparison to non-resident fathers, childless men do not have lower or only have slightly lower levels of life satisfaction and do not have higher or only have slightly higher levels of daily mood.*

### *5.2.2 Partnership history*

Given that many of the transitions into and out of (resident) fatherhood are related to starting and ending romantic relationships, partnership history rather than parental status may be responsible for differences between childless men and fathers. Empirical research supports this claim. First, numerous studies have shown that men who have a partner and men who are married are most likely to enter fatherhood (Barber, 2001; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Parr, 2005; Schoen et al., 1999; Schoen et al., 1997), whereas relationship break-ups at key points in adulthood are likely a precursor to a childless life (Latten & Kreijen, 2001). Second, previous studies have uniformly shown that partnership history is related to men's behavior and well-being. Cohabiting men and especially married men have more contacts with their family (Eggebeen, 2005), are more strongly attached to the labor force (Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990) and have higher levels of physical health and psychological well-being (Akerlof, 1998; Brown, 2000; Brown, Bulanda, & Lee, 2005; Coombs, 1991; Waite, 1995; Woo & Raley, 2005). Furthermore, experiencing dissolution of a partnership is related to men's psychological, social, health and economic activities and well-being as well; divorced men have less contact with their family (Gerstel, 1988), exhibit less healthy behavior (Williams & Umberson, 2004), are less committed to their occupational careers (Kalmijn, 2005), and are more distressed (Booth & Amato, 1991; Wallerstein & Blakeslee, 1990). To find out whether differences between childless men and fathers are attributable to partnership history, we explicitly take partnership history into account in our analyses.

## **5.3 Method**

### *5.3.1 Data source*

Data from the public release file of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS) have been used. The NKPS is a large scale panel survey on family ties, conducted between 2002 and 2004 among a representative sample of adults aged 18 to 79 residing in private households in the Netherlands (Dykstra et al., 2005). The data were collected by means of computer assisted personal interviews supplemented with self-completion questionnaires. The overall response rate was 45 per cent, which is lower than in comparable surveys in other Western countries, but similar to comparable large-scale family surveys in the

Netherlands (De Leeuw & De Heer, 2001; Dykstra et al., 2005). The Dutch appear to be particularly sensitive about privacy issues. In addition to the face-to-face interviews, respondents filled in self-completion questionnaires with items pertaining to attitudes and other subjective measures: 92 per cent of the self-completion questionnaires were returned.

For the present analyses, we restricted the sample to men aged 40 up to 59. We chose to omit individuals under the age of 40 at the time of the interview because their childlessness status is not likely to be permanent. Dutch, American and Australian research showed that the likelihood of having a first child at age 40 and over is very small (Garssen et al., 2001; Landry & Darroch Forrest, 1995; Parr, 2005). Analyses using NKPS data confirm this finding: the majority of fathers (97.0 %) had their first child before the age of 40. Men who had their first child beyond the age of 40 were excluded from the analyses. We chose to omit respondents who were older than 59 because there is little variation in parental status among them; few still have children living at home. Given our interest in distinguishing fatherhood and fathering, we decided to only focus on middle-aged men. The age restrictions and the non-response for the self-completion questionnaires left us with a total of 1451 respondents.

### *5.3.2 Measures*

*Parental status: Focus on biological childlessness.* In this paper, childlessness is defined as never having had children (neither biological, step nor adoptive children). Although the impact of having children is not restricted to biological ties to children, but may also apply to having social ties to children, in this paper we only focus on the impact of biological childlessness. Reasons for this choice are the very low numbers of stepchildren and adopted children in our dataset. Of the entire group of men aged 40-59, 0.8 % were living with adopted children, and 2.2 % were living with step-children (weighted percentages). A reason for this low proportion of respondents with stepchildren is demographic reality: Divorce rates in the Netherlands are not as high as they are in the United Kingdom or in the Scandinavian countries, for example. Another reason concerns the way in which questions about stepchildren were phrased. Respondents were requested to report only those stepchildren with whom they were currently living or with whom they had lived in the past. Stepchildren who had never co-resided with the respondent were not listed. Due to the low numbers, men who had no children of their own (i.e. no biological or adoptive children) but were living with step-children ( $N=6$ ) were also excluded from the analyses. Finally, men who outlived their children ( $N=4$ ) were excluded from the analyses.

In our sample of 1451 men, 330 men (23 %) are childless. Men with biological children were categorized as resident father when one or more of their biological children

were living in the parental home ( $n = 712$ ; 49 %). They were categorized as non-resident fathers when their children did not live with them ( $n = 409$ ; 28 %).

*Partnership history.* To find out whether differences between childless men and fathers are attributable to having (had) a partner, rather than to having children, we explicitly take partnership history into account. We created two separate variables for men's partnership history. The first is current partner status; we differentiated between: (a) currently not partnered,  $n = 380$  (b) currently cohabiting,  $n = 117$ , and (c) currently married,  $n = 954$ . In our sample, 16 men have a partner, but do not live with that person (1 per cent of our sample). We excluded them from our analyses.

We separate currently cohabiting from currently married, as scholars have suggested that cohabitation is more an alternative to being single than a precursor to being married; cohabitation, in comparison to marriage, is less strongly associated with having children and less strongly associated with our outcome variables such as contact with family members (Axinn & Thornton, 1992; Rindfuss & VandenHeuvel, 1990; Smock, 2000).

The second variable indicates whether the respondent has ever experienced a divorce in the past. The rationale for a separate variable for divorce is that we pose that having experienced a divorce may have an impact on men's lives that can still be felt when a new partner is found. Moreover, previous research has suggested that relationship break-ups at key points in adulthood are likely a precursor to a childless life (Latten & Kreijen, 2001). Both a legal divorce as well as dissolution of a non-marital cohabiting relationship is considered a divorce. 984 respondents have never experienced a divorce, whereas 467 have ever separated. Of this latter group, 313 have experienced a legal divorce (66 per cent).

### *Dependent variables*

*Personal leisure* is measured by a four-item scale. The respondents were asked whether they (1) had participated in sports, (2) had participated in cultural activities, such as theatre, concert or museum, (3) had gone to "a restaurant, café, movie or party and (4) had gone on an outdoor outing, cycle, hike in the past twelve months. Answers range from 4 = *not at all* up to 16 = *12 times or more*. Cronbach's alpha is .62.

*Contact with parents.* We chose to use the measure of contact with parents as indicator of contact with family members. Contact with parents is delineated from two separate questions on how often the respondents had seen their mother and father in the last twelve months. Responses range from 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *daily*. When both parents are alive, we averaged both scores. When only one parent is alive, contact with this parent is used for our analyses. For this outcome only, we excluded respondents whose parents were both

no longer alive ( $n = 517$ ). We also controlled for geographical distance between the respondent and the parents.

*Contact with neighbors.* Information on contact with one's neighbors is assessed via the question: "Did you visit neighbors and/or have neighbors visited you in the past 12 months? If so, how often?" Answer categories ranged from 1 = *not at all* to 4 = *twelve times or more*.

*Community involvement* is measured by a two-item scale. Respondents were asked whether they had engaged in (1) "volunteer work for association, church or other organization (not school)" and (2) "providing unpaid help to sick or handicapped acquaintances or neighbors (not family)" in the past twelve months. Answers ranged from 2 = *not at all* up to 8 = *12 times or more*. *Cronbach's alpha* is .24. Even though we recognize that the alpha-value is low, we argue that it is justified to use this measure of community involvement for two reasons. First, alpha is meant for scales with interchangeable items (Nijdam, 2003), and volunteer work for an association and volunteer work for individuals are not intended to be interchangeable. Rather, they represent different types of community involvement. Second, the variable is constructed of only two items, making it more difficult to reach high alpha-values.

*Physical health.* Information is provided by means of men's self-rated health, which is assessed via the question: "How is your health in general?" Answer categories range from 1 = *least good* to 5 = *excellent*.

*Monthly personal income.* Information about personal income is delineated via the questions: "What is your net monthly income from employment?" The scores on this question were categorized into quintiles.

*Work hours.* Information on work hours is delineated via the question: "How many hours a week on average do you actually work? That is to say, actual hours worked". When a respondent has several jobs, the numbers of hours of these jobs were added up. Respondents who currently do not have a job, are assigned 0 hours of work ( $n = 236$ ).

*Life satisfaction* is measured by the Diener's Life satisfaction scale (Diener et al., 1985), with scores ranging from 4 = *least satisfied with life* up to 20 = *most satisfied with life*. Examples of scale items are: "My life is ideal in most respects" and "If I could live my life again, I would change very little". *Cronbach's alpha* is .83.

*Daily mood* is measured by the five-item Mental Health Index (Berwick et al., 1991) with scores ranging from 5 = *lowest* up to 30 = *highest*. Examples of scale items are: "How often have you felt particularly downhearted and miserable in the past 4 weeks?" and "How often have you felt happy in the past 4 weeks?" *Cronbach's alpha* is .86.

*Control variables.* Differences between childless men and fathers might actually be based on selection, that is, that childless men differ in fundamental ways from fathers, even before the latter have children. The rationale is that childless men are not selected into

fatherhood because they have less desirable traits. For example, men with poor socioeconomic prospects are less likely to become husbands and fathers than men with good provider potential (Becker, 1991; Bernard, 1972). Given the cross-sectional nature of our research-design, we cannot find out whether selection plays a role. However, we introduced the level of education as a control in our analyses, to correct for possible confounding effects of pre-existing differences in socioeconomic potential between childless men and fathers. Respondents were asked about the highest level of education that they pursued. Answers ranged from 1 = *did not complete elementary school* to 10 = *post-graduate*.

Second, research has consistently shown that work roles are important for men's identity, their social ties and their psychological health, see for example (Hatten et al., 2002; Warin et al., 1999) Therefore, we included men's employment status, that is a dummy variable indicating whether or not someone is currently employed, as a control variable in our analyses, with the exception of the analysis of work hours.

Third, one's physical state is found to have a strong impact on people's social activities, people's work behavior and their psychological well-being (Biddle, Fox, & Boutcher, 2000; Mastekaasa, 1996). Therefore, we also control for physical health in our analyses.

Fourth, as research has shown that age has an impact on the life outcomes studied, for example, that contact with family members and neighbors vary with age (Hagestad & De Jong Gierveld, 2006), we introduce age as a control in our analyses. Age was measured in years.

Means and standard deviations for our dependent variables and control variables are shown in Table 5.1.

**Table 5.1** Descriptive statistics (n = 1451)

Variables	M	SD	Range
Personal leisure	11.08	2.8	4-16
Parent contact	4.27	1.3	1-7
Neighbors contact	2.47	1.0	1-4
Community involvement	3.30	1.5	2-8
Physical health	4.03	0.8	1-5
Income <sup>a</sup>	3.01	1.4	1-5
Work hours	35.01	18.3	0-80
Psychological mood	24.30	3.8	5-30
Satisfaction with life	14.45	2.8	4-20
Education	6.26	2.4	1-10
Employment status	.84	0.4	0-1
Age	49.12	5.6	40-59

<sup>a</sup>Income 1 = (0 – 1243); 2 = (1243 – 1650); 3 = (1650 – 2100); 4 = (2100 – 2700); and 5 = (> 2700) Euro a month.

## 5.4 Analyses

### 5.4.1 Preliminary analyses

To reveal associations between parental status and partnership history, we ran preliminary analyses. These analyses (not shown) revealed that two thirds of childless men do not have a partner, compared to nearly a third of the non-resident fathers, and less than a tenth of resident fathers. The percentages of cohabitation are more similar; 10 % of childless men, 6 % of non-resident fathers and 8 % of resident fathers currently cohabit. Whereas only a quarter of childless men is married, almost two thirds of the non-resident fathers and a clear majority of resident fathers are married. Finally, two fifths of childless men and non-resident fathers have ever divorced compared to less than a quarter of all resident fathers.

### 5.4.2 Primary analyses

We estimated two models for each outcome: One with our control variables and parental status; and another which also included indicators for partnership history. We added partnership history in a separate step to identify whether partnership history accounts for observed parental status differences. Seemingly unrelated estimation was used to examine whether the change in the size of the parental status coefficients between Model 1 and

Model 2 was significant. Table 5.2 through 5.4 show the results for social activities, health and economic activities, and psychological well-being respectively.

## 5.5 Results

The results in Model 1 of Table 5.2 show that, contrary to our expectations, childless men do not differ from fathers with respect to personal leisure. Men's level of education, and to a lesser extent, their employment status and health are better predictors of men's participation in personal leisure activities than parental status. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 does not lead to a significant improvement of the model fit.

We expected childless men to have less frequent contact with their parents in comparison to fathers, in particular resident fathers. Model 1 shows that childless men do not differ from fathers. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 does not lead to an improvement of the model fit. Distance to one's parents and, to a lesser extent, health and educational attainment, are better predictors of contact with one's parents than parental status.

Looking at Model 1 of the third set of columns, we find that parental status contributes to the explanation of contact with neighbors. Childless men have significantly less frequent contact with their neighbors in comparison to resident fathers. Childless men do not significantly differ from non-resident fathers. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 leads to a significant improvement of the model fit. Men who are currently unpartnered have significantly less contact with their neighbors in comparison to currently married men. The inclusion of men's partnerships history significantly reduces the effects of being a resident father to insignificance. Our findings suggest that the reason that childless men have less contact with their neighbors in comparison to resident fathers is that they are more often unpartnered.

In line with our expectations, Model 1 of the fourth set of columns shows that non-resident fathers and especially resident fathers are more engaged in their community in comparison to childless men. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 leads to a significant improvement of the model fit. In comparison to men who are currently married, men who are currently cohabiting are less involved in their community. Men who have ever experienced the dissolution of a partnership are less involved in their community than the never separated. With the inclusion of partnership history, the effect of being a non-resident father is reduced to insignificance, but the drop in effect size is not significant. The magnitude of the coefficient of being a resident father decreases strongly, but remains significant. The drop in effect size is significant. Controlled for age, education, employment status, health, and partnership history, childless men are less involved in their community in comparison to resident fathers.

Model 1 of Table 5.3 shows that childless men report lower levels of health in comparison to resident fathers, which is consistent with our expectations. Childless men do not significantly differ from non-resident fathers. The latter finding is contrary to our expectations. Noteworthy, men's educational attainment and especially men's health have more predictive power than parental status. The addition of men's partnership history in Model 2 leads to a significant improvement of the model fit. Ever having experienced the dissolution of a partnership and especially currently not being partnered are associated with lower levels of health. The inclusion of men's partnership history reduces the effect of being a resident father to insignificance and this drop in effect size is significant. Overall, our findings suggest that the reason why childless men have poorer health than resident fathers is that they are more often unpartnered and that they have more often experienced the dissolution of a partnership.

Confirming our expectations, the second set of columns in Table 5.3 shows that childless men report lower levels of *income* in comparison to fathers. Both resident and non-resident fathers have significantly higher levels of income in comparison to childless men. Noteworthy, men's educational attainment and men's employment status are more strongly associated with men's level of income than parental status. The addition of men's partnership history leads to a significant improvement of the model fit. Currently cohabiting and especially currently not having a partner are associated with lower levels of income. With the inclusion of partnership history, the effect of being a resident father diminishes, but remains significant, which indicates that having children remains a powerful predictor of income even when partnership history is controlled for.

Turning to work hours, the last set of columns in Table 5.3, results show that, in line with our expectations, childless men work significantly fewer hours a week than fathers. Both resident and non-resident fathers have longer work weeks in comparison to childless men. Noteworthy, health and age are better predictors of how many hours men work than parental status. As the Model 2 results show, unpartnered men work fewer hours than married men. The inclusion of partnership history reduces the effect of being a resident father to insignificance, and this drop in effect size is significant. Furthermore, the effect of being a non-resident father decreases, but remains significant. When age, educational attainment, health and partnership history are controlled for, only the difference between childless men and non-resident fathers remains significant.

**Table 5.2** Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting men's social activities (n = 1451)

	Personal leisure		Contact parent		Neighbors contact		Community involvement	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Resident father	.002	-.024	-.022	.012	.096***	.005	.119***	.083*
Non-resident father (vs. Permanently childless men)	.016	.002	-.063	-.042	.013	-.022	.075*	.071
Age	-.028	.027	.037	.037	.082**	.059*	.077**	.053
Education	.348***	.343***	-.068*	-.065*	.081**	.072**	.105***	.106***
Employment status	.062*	.059*	-.047	-.047	.001	-.008	-.056	-.059
Health	.171***	.168***	.142***	.142***	.019	.005	.009	.044
Distance			-.453***	-.451***				
Currently not partnered		-.050*		.074		-.132***		-.031
Currently cohabiting (vs. Currently married)		.042		.009		-.020		-.072*
Ever separated (vs. Never separated)		.020		-.068*		-.024		-.071*
Adj. $R^2$	.193	.195	.224	.225	.014	.027	.025	.035
$\Delta F$	52.0***	2.2	33.7***	1.4	4.5***	7.2***	6.3***	5.5***

Note: \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

**Table 5.3** Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting men's health and economic activities (n = 1451)

	Physical health		Income		Work hours	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Resident father	.062*	-.011	.155***	.082**	.125***	.062
Non-resident father (vs. Permanently childless men)	.012	-.007	.185***	.156***	.098***	.076**
Age	-.022	-.040	.075**	.052*	-.135***	-.152***
Education	.134***	.123***	.338***	.334***	.121***	.114***
Employment status	.318***	.306***	.359***	.353***	-	-
Health			.071**	.062**	.290***	.277***
Currently not partnered		-.083**		-.104***		-.085*
Currently cohabiting (vs. Currently married)		-.005		-.064**		-.019
Ever separated (vs. Never separated)		-.048*		-.023		-.036
Adj. $R^2$			.346	.354	.150	.156
$\Delta F$			123.0***	6.7***	52.3***	4.8**

Note: \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

**Table 5.4** Hierarchical regression analysis for variables predicting men’s well-being (n = 1451)

	Life satisfaction		Psychological mood	
	Model 1	Model 2	Model 1	Model 2
Resident father	.095**	-.087*	.076**	-.018
Non-resident father (vs. Permanently childless men)	.035	-.032	.039	.013
Age	.066*	.022	.124**	.095***
Education	-.018	-.038	.020	.010
Employment status	.080**	.059*	.073**	.061*
Health	.268***	.258***	.322***	.305***
Currently not partnered (vs. Currently married)		-.260***		-.121***
Currently cohabiting (vs. Currently married)		-.013		-.012
Ever separated (vs. Never separated)		-.064*		-.082***
Adj. $R^2$	.107	.167	.137	.158
$\Delta F$	30.1***	35.7***	39.4***	13.5***

Note \* =  $p < .05$ ; \*\* =  $p < .01$ ; \*\*\* =  $p < .001$ .

Consistent with expectations, the findings in Model 1 of Table 5.4 show that childless men have lower levels of life satisfaction in comparison to resident fathers. The life satisfaction of childless men is not significantly different from that of non-resident fathers, which is contrary to expectations. Noteworthy, men’s health has more predictive power than parental status. The inclusion of men’s partnership history in Model 2 changes the results drastically. Men who have ever separated and men who are currently not partnered are less satisfied with their lives. Noteworthy, with the inclusion of men’s partnership history, the coefficient for being a resident father becomes negative rather than positive. This change in effect size is significant. Resident fathers are only advantaged because they are more likely to be partnered in comparison to childless men. Contrary to our expectations, when controlled for age, educational attainment, employment status, health and partnership history, childless men are more satisfied with their lives in comparison to resident fathers.

Turning to the last set of columns in Table 5.4, our findings in Model 1 show that childless men have lower levels of daily mood in comparison to resident fathers only. These results change when men’s partnership history is included in Model 2. Men who are currently not partnered and men who have ever separated have significantly lower

levels of daily mood. With the inclusion of men's partnership history, the effect of being a resident father is reduced to insignificance and this drop in effect size is significant. Men's health and to a lesser extent their age are better predictors of men's psychological mood than parental status. Overall, our findings suggest that the reason why childless men have lower levels of daily mood in comparison to resident fathers is that they are more often unpartnered and more often have experienced the dissolution of a partnership.

## **5.6 Discussion**

### *5.6.1 Conclusions and implications*

Our analyses contribute to the developing literature on the impact of permanent childlessness on men's lives. We show that remaining without children makes a difference, albeit small, in the lives of middle-aged men. In line with prior research (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007b; Umberson & Gove, 1989), we find that the implications of childlessness are not uniform across all life domains. Our results also show that to find out how fatherhood matters in men's lives, it is important to distinguish the status of being a father from the active involvement with children.

Parenthood differences are most prominent in the economic domain. Childless men have lower levels of income in comparison to both resident and non-resident fathers. The finding underscores the good-provider role of men who have become fathers. Lundberg and Rose have described the higher wage rates of men who become fathers as a 'fatherhood premium' (2002). As other scholars have shown (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001), most fathers view being a provider as the most important role in life and the most important function they can fulfill for their children.

Regarding work hours, we find that only non-resident fathers work more hours than childless men, and that the length of the work week does not differ between resident fathers and childless men. Although it is suggested in the literature that a transition from traditional fatherhood to responsible fathering is slowly taking place (see for example Brannen & Nilsen, 2006; Hobson, 2002), we find no support for the responsible fathering hypothesis (Doherty, Kouneski, & Erickson, 1998), which holds that fathers spend less time on work because they want to be involved in nurturing and rearing their children. Our study shows no difference in workweek length between childless men and resident fathers. The absence of support for the responsible fathering hypothesis might be a cohort effect. Active involvement in childcare is a relative recent model of paternal involvement (Christiansen & Palkovitz, 2001). Men in older cohorts are more likely to be traditional fathers; those who assume responsibility for providing economically for their families and therefore spend much time on work. It is conceivable that future cohorts of middle-aged men will show a larger proportion of fathers in part-time employment.

Previous research has consistently shown that permanent childlessness is associated with strong socio-economic positions for women, especially the never married (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007a). Our findings show an opposite pattern for men; those with children have stronger economic positions than those who have remained childless. In our society, the gender-based division of tasks leads to greater restrictions on combining work and childcare responsibilities for women than men (Hakim, 2003; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Schippers, 2003; Wetzels, 2001). Women, rather than men, encounter the opportunity costs of having children. Childless women can more easily invest in their occupational career than mothers. Furthermore, a strong focus on one's occupational career also makes it less likely that women enter parenthood.

In contemplating the findings, we feel that specifics of Dutch society should be noted. The Netherlands have the highest share of part-time workers of all European countries (Eurostat, 2006); about 23 % of Dutch men work part-time in comparison to an EU-average of almost 8 %. In the Netherlands, working part-time may be seen as a more viable option for men than in other European countries. It may especially be a nice option for childless men, leaving time open for leisure as they do not have to provide for any children. Additional analyses on our data confirm this; childless men are more likely to work part-time in comparison to resident and non-resident fathers.

Differences between childless men and fathers are less prominent in other life domains than the economic. Regarding social activities, we find parenthood differences for community involvement, but not for leisure and contacts with family and neighbors. High levels of community involvement emerge for resident fathers only, suggesting that the presence of children at home motivates men to participate in activities that serve the local good. Of course, resident children might also serve as 'connectors' (Gallagher & Gerstel, 2001) here, linking their fathers to local networks. In the psychological domain our results show that the childless are advantaged. Childless men are more satisfied with their lives than resident fathers, a finding in line with recent American work (Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006).

Importantly, our work reveals that differences between childless men and fathers are often attributable to partnership history. For example, we demonstrated that childless men report lower levels of health because they are more often unpartnered, and not because they have not made the transition to fatherhood. What at first glance appears to be the impact of fatherhood, turns out to be health benefits related to having a partner. As other scholars have suggested, having children may affect men's life outcomes foremost indirectly through increasing the probability of a current partnership (Kohler, Behrman, & Skytthe, 2005). Disentangling parental status and partnership status is essential to understanding why permanently childless men have different life outcomes in comparison to fathers.

This study started from the premise that an examination of the structuring influence of parenthood is a means to find out what it is about having children that matters for how well men fare. Given that few differences between childless men and fathers emerged, we conclude that men's lives are not strongly structured by parenthood. Nevertheless, the favorable economic position of fathers is evidence of life course structuring in the sense of responsiveness to social control (the normative pressure to be a good provider) and the prioritization of activities that benefit offspring. The high level of community involvement observed for resident fathers is evidence of life course structuring in the sense that children provide opportunities for social engagement, and also that men are motivated to invest in activities that serve their children's interests. Our results indicate that many of the parenthood differences can be attributed to partner history. For that reason, our overall conclusion is that having children structures men's lives foremost indirectly through the benefits linked with having a partner. The economic domain seems to be the only domain in which childless men are disadvantaged in the long run.

#### *5.6.2 Limitations and future directions*

Two limitations of our study should be noted. First, as discussed previously, we were unable to control for reversed causation and selection, given our cross-sectional design. As a result, inferences regarding the extent to which parental status causes differences in men's lives are tenuous. Favorable personal traits such as optimism and self-confidence make it more likely that men are healthier, more satisfied with their lives, and so forth (Scheier & Carver, 1992). Such traits also make men more likely to enter marriage and fatherhood (Botwin, Buss, & Shackelford, 1997). Some of our parental status differences might therefore be spurious effects. Being healthy, having good economic positions, and high life satisfaction are also factors that increase the likelihood that men become fathers and enter marriage (Mastekaasa, 1992; Stutzer & Frey, 2006). Our findings may therefore be attributable to reversed causation. Therefore, we cannot with full certainty state that fatherhood and childlessness cause men to behave in certain ways. Additional studies with longitudinal designs are needed to investigate how and to what extent men's life outcomes are shaped by permanent childlessness. However, regardless of whether the disadvantaged economic position of childless men is based on selection or causation, our findings suggest that parenthood status warrants greater attention in analyses of socio-economic inequality of middle aged men.

Second, we were not able to explore the impact of step-parenthood on men's lives, due to the low proportion of stepchildren in our data set. It would be interesting to find out whether the impact of childlessness depends on not having biological or social ties to children, especially now the prevalence of non-traditional families is rising (Dykstra, 2004; Juby & Le Bourdais, 1998; Liebroer, 1999; Rendall, Josh, Oh, & Verropoulou,

2001; Stacey, 1990). Future research that compares the impact of childlessness with the impact of step-parenthood would be a welcome addition to the literature.

# Chapter 6

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Conclusion and discussion



## 6.1 Background and questions of the study

Despite the forecast that one out of every five Dutch women born after the 1960s will remain childless (De Graaf & Van Duin, 2007), scholarly attention for the topic of childlessness has remained limited in contrast to the bulk of studies focusing on (the timing of) parenthood. Most studies start from the point of view of the family cycle, focusing on those who become parents. As a consequence, individuals who will never make that transition tend to be overlooked. The aim of this thesis was twofold: First, to find out what the antecedents of remaining childless are, and second, to what extent and why the life outcomes of childless individuals differ from those of parents.

I approached the antecedents and consequences of childlessness from a life course perspective. I applied the life course perspective in several ways; not only did I focus on interdependencies between the life domains of individuals, but I also extended the focus beyond current statuses of these individuals by including their life histories.

Analyses were done using data from the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (Dykstra & Komter, 2006), a large-scale panel survey containing information on family ties. This information was provided by 8,161 respondents, a random sample of the Dutch population. This large-scale size enabled me to analyze different pathways into childlessness and to assess the outcomes of childlessness in conjunction with other life histories, such as partnership history.

## 6.2 Summary of findings

### 6.2.1 Pathways into childlessness

The first research question addressed in this study refers to routes leading into remaining childless and read: *Which educational, occupational and marital pathways increase the likelihood of remaining childless and are these pathways different for women and men?*

Research on childlessness tends to be characterized by dichotomized thinking. Childless individuals are often divided in two groups: Those who have voluntarily chosen to remain without offspring and those who would have liked to have had children. A life course perspective moves away from dichotomized thinking: It stresses the difficulties of framing childlessness in terms of choice; emphasizing that choice processes happen in a dynamic, interdependent context. In Chapter 2, I therefore adopted the perspective that remaining childless is not the outcome of a single decision not to have children, but rather the outcome of a dynamic process, in which cumulative contingencies and path interdependencies play a considerable role.

I considered the importance of interdependencies across life trajectories (within an individual's life). Several authors have suggested that rather than explicitly choosing

childlessness, people make choices about delaying marriage and focusing on educational and occupational careers, and then end up childless (DeOllos & Kapinus, 2002; Letherby, 2002). In Chapter 2, I therefore focused on educational, occupational and marital pathways linked with remaining childless. Because women experience stronger interdependencies between their marital and working life and because women have biological restrictions for having children, I examined the pathways into childlessness separately for women and men.

To answer my research question, I made use of the first wave of the NKPS, and 2867 women and 2195 men aged 40 up to 79 were included in the sample. I conducted binary logistic regressions. The results revealed gendered pathways into childlessness. Educational attainment turned out to be an indicator for a childless life for women only, not for men. This was in line with studies that showed that a high level of education increased the opportunity costs of having children for women. The chances of remaining childless were opposite for women and men when their occupational pathways were considered; a stable career was a prerequisite for men's transition to parenthood, but it hampered that of women. The impact of marital history also varied by gender. Remaining without a partner increased the chances of a childless life for women, and even more so for men. Circumstances in their marital career seemed to primarily shape men's childlessness, a phenomenon that was also witnessed by De Meester et al (2005). Apparently, concerning their childbearing outcomes, men depended heavily on what, or better said who, crossed their life path. The results also indicated the importance of the number of times people's life paths were crossed. I found that people with multiple partnerships, especially men, were more likely to remain childless. This suggested that the chances of becoming a parent have dwindled by a break-up, perhaps by reducing the pool of eligible parents-to-be. Support was also found for some gender-neutral pathways. The impact of years without a partner was similar for women and men, and age at first union had no impact on remaining childless neither for women nor men.

In sum, some pathways sealed off the transition to parenthood, whereas others opened it up. Not all of these pathways may have been the outcome of active decision making; some may have merely happened to people, for example unemployment or relationship break-ups. This suggested that remaining childless is a subtle interactive process rather than an active one-time decision. It also suggested that people are less of the captains of their own biographies as some scholars want us to believe. It appeared that the agentic point of view on people's life courses does not always do justice to demographic reality.

### *6.2.2 Childlessness and social cohesion*

The second question of this study focused on differences between childless individuals and parents in terms of familial solidarity. The research question was:

*Do contemporary childless individuals have weaker or stronger feelings of familial responsibility in comparison to parents? And do processes of selection or adaptation underlie these findings?*

Despite the fact that remaining childless has become a more common and accepted form of living over the decades (Morgan, 1996; Thornton, 1989; Thornton & Young-DeMarco, 2001), stubborn stereotypes of the childless remain. Childless individuals are seen as individualistic people who avoid social responsibility and who are less prepared to commit themselves to helping others in society (Kopper & Smith, 2001; LaMastro, 2001; Letherby, 2002; Mueller & Yoder, 1999). In Chapter 3 of this book, I addressed the question of whether the childless feel less responsible for their family compared with people who have children. From a life course perspective, predictions in two diverging directions were made regarding childlessness and familial responsibility. These predictions were based on notions of parenthood as a binding force between family members and parenthood as a resource-depleting role. On the one hand, the childless, compared to parents, were expected to feel less responsible for their parents due to the discrepancy in their life styles. On the other hand, the childless were expected to feel more responsible for their family because they have more free-available time given the absence of childcare and childrearing obligations.

I combined insights from the literature on intergenerational obligations and the literature on childlessness. In the former, childlessness has remained an understudied topic and when it has received attention, childlessness is assessed in a rather crude dichotomized way, only differentiating between those who have and those who do not have children. In contrast, the childlessness literature informs us about the necessity to take diversity among the childless into account. I made distinctions based on volition, which not only created distinctions among the childless, but which also helped us to disentangle processes of selection and adaptation. Furthermore, I focused on two different types of familial responsibility; universal and personal familial responsibility. The former refers to general norms for how family members should behave, while the latter concerns people's own expressions of familial responsibility.

I made use of the second wave of the NKPS, focusing on two separate samples of individuals. I distinguished individuals in their fertile years from those beyond. The rationale was that individuals in their fertile years may have overstated that they wanted to have children due to pronatalistic pressures in society. In the sample of individuals beyond their fertile years, the opposite may have occurred; some people may have adjusted their feelings to their actual parental status, and thus reported that they are childless by choice, in order to avoid dissonance. There were 1505 women and 1181 men in the sample of individuals of fertile age. There were 1564 women and 915 men in the

sample of individuals beyond fertile age. I conducted multiple classification analyses, in which the means were adjusted for education, partnership status and religion.

The results showed that only childless individuals who voluntarily choose to remain childless, and not those who want to have children, hold weaker norms of familial responsibility in comparison to parents. These findings underlined the importance of having knowledge of the degree of volition in order to fully understand how childlessness impacts people's feelings and behaviors, as others have also indicated (Connidis & McMullin, 1996). Making distinctions among the childless also enabled us to scrutinize whether adaptation or selection underlied the association between parental status and norms of familial responsibility. I found most evidence for processes of selection; in most cases only individuals who choose to remain childless reported weaker norms of familial responsibility.

Nevertheless, strong adaptation effects were found for men; fathers beyond their fertile years expressed much stronger norms of familial responsibility in comparison to both voluntarily and involuntarily childless men. This might be related to the notion of family men have on their minds when answering the question on familial responsibility. Although men were explicitly told that family included their entire extended family, entering fatherhood may have triggered them to think primarily of family as their nuclear family. For childless men, the notion of family is presumably more strongly linked to their entire extended family. As Rossi and Rossi (1990) found that people express stronger feelings of family obligations for closer kin, this might provide an explanation for why fathers express stronger familial responsibility. Whereas parenthood served to reinforce men's norms of personal familial responsibility, I did not find an impact of parental status on women's norms of personal familial responsibility. In previous studies, women's role in the family as kin keepers has been demonstrated repeatedly (Rosenthal, 1985; Rossi & Rossi, 1990). Where women may always feel responsible for their family irrespectively of parental status, it appeared that for men children prompt the significance of family in their lives.

In contrasting people's norms of what family members in general should do for their family (universal familial responsibility) and what respondents themselves report to do for their own family members (personal familial responsibility), I found intriguing differences among women. Voluntarily childless women did not differ from mothers regarding personal familial responsibility, but they did report lower levels of universal familial responsibility. This finding suggested that voluntarily childless women do not want to impose responsibility on others; that everybody should decide for themselves how responsible they want to be. In this respect, childless women indeed exhibited individualistic characteristics, although without the negative connotation of avoiding social responsibility.

### 6.2.3 Childlessness and social inequality

The third research questions addressed in this study refers to the transition to parenthood and its impact on feelings of well-being and read: *To what extent does entering parenthood affect feelings of well-being?*

Does entering parenthood decrease well-being? This question has been studied frequently in the transition to parenthood literature, but the results are mixed. In Chapter 4 of this book, I posed that the inconclusive evidence is attributable to difficulties in capturing the complex relationship between entering parenthood and well-being. I tried to add to the literature by moving beyond the de-contextualized analyses of previous work, meaning that I took into account the co-occurrence of transitions in the working and marital life of the respondents.

In order to answer my research question, both waves of the NKPS, with an average three-year interval, were used. I conducted fixed effect analyses to assess whether the transition to parenthood affects well-being. A major advantage of this technique is the ability to obtain unbiased estimates of change over time (Johnson, 2005). In addition to eliminating unobserved heterogeneity, the fixed effect model was also conceptually well suited for my analyses because it uses changes in the independent variables to predict changes in the dependent variable. I conducted analyses separately for women and men, as women often experience stronger interdependencies between childbearing behavior and other aspects of their life, such as their occupation, in comparison to men (Moen, 1996). My sample consisted of 338 childless women under 40 and 262 childless men under 45 at the time of the first interview.

Overall, the findings showed a moderate impact of entering parenthood on feelings of well-being. Insofar effects of making the transition to parenthood emerged, they were attributable to changes in partner status and work hours. For women, the loss of the work role rather than the transition to parenthood contributed to a decrease in new mothers' well-being. For men, stronger commitments to the relationship rather than the entry into fatherhood accounted for heightened feelings of loneliness.

The focus on multiple outcomes of well-being showed that entering parenthood can be both a joy and a tribulation for women: the uncontrolled results revealed that entering motherhood decreased feelings of negative affect, but also increased the number of conflicts these women had with their partner and decreased their partnership satisfaction. For men, I only found evidence for the gloomy side of parenthood; the uncontrolled results revealed that men who made the transition to fatherhood reported becoming more lonely, reported less positive affect and less satisfaction with their partnership.

Most studies that have observed both mother's and father's adjustment to parenthood, found that the transition is more detrimental for women. My inquiry showed a different

pattern. This might be related to differences in the time frame one looks at. In general, previous studies have mostly looked at the first couple of months or the first year of parenthood. In this period, especially women experience multiple and radical role changes: The time frame of the present study was expanded beyond these initial months of possible glow and trauma and my study revealed that, when applying a larger time frame, men were affected by the transition to parenthood to the same extent as women were. Note though that my time frame is still relatively limited – a maximum of three years after the arrival of the first child.

#### *6.2.4 A focus on middle-aged childless men*

The fourth and final research question of this study focused on the life outcomes of childless men and read: *How well do middle-aged childless men fare in the long run in comparison to fathers?*

Compared to the numerous studies that have focused on the life outcomes of childless women, literature on the life outcomes of men is scarce. In the last empirical chapter of this book, I therefore considered the consequences of leading a childless life for men. In contrast to Chapter 4, which focuses on the early years of parenthood, in Chapter 5 I investigate whether parenthood affects the lives of middle-aged men. In this chapter, I wanted to improve upon previous research and reach an understanding of why childless men might differ from fathers. Some scholars have argued that the transition to parenthood transforms men's lives permanently (Palkovitz, 2002; Snarey, 1993), whereas others have emphasized that the changes in men's lives are restricted to the time period in which they actively occupy fathering roles (Brannen & Nilsen, 2006; Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001). To find out whether it is having offspring rather than the active involvement with children that matters for men's life outcomes, I made distinctions between resident and non-resident fathers and compared them with childless men.

The literature suggested that especially men benefit from marriage (Nock, 1998; Waite, 1995). To find out whether it was having a partner rather than having children which attributed to differences between childless men and fathers, I explicitly took partnership history into account. Finally, I focused on four different life domains, social activities, health, economic activities and psychological well-being in order to identify when childlessness matters for men's lives and when it does not.

I made use of the first wave of the NKPS to answer my research question. I restricted the sample to men aged 40 up to 59 ( $n = 1451$ ). Hierarchical regression analyses were conducted to find out whether the initial impact of men's parental status was attributable to their partnership history. I found that childlessness made a difference in men's lives, although this difference was small. The lives of childless men were not affected similarly in different life domains, which confirmed previous work (Eggebeen & Knoester, 2001;

Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006; Umberson & Gove, 1989). The largest impact of fatherhood on men's lives was found in the economic domain, which underscored the good provider role of men who have become fathers. Childless men had lower levels of income in comparison to resident and non-resident fathers and worked fewer hours in comparison to non-resident fathers. This confirmed the expectation that the economic prospects of childless men are not very positive in the long run. Results in other life domains showed a less clear pattern. Regarding social activities, I only found that childless men showed lower commitment levels to the community in comparison to resident fathers, which suggested that the presence of children in men's home stimulates them to participate in activities that serve a greater good. I also found a beneficial impact of childlessness; childless men were more satisfied with their lives compared to resident fathers, which confirmed recent American findings (Knoester & Eggebeen, 2006). Finally, this study revealed that differences between childless men and fathers were often attributable to partnership history. As other scholars have also suggested, having children appeared to affect men's lives foremost indirectly through increasing the probability of a current partnership (Kohler et al., 2005). These findings underscored the necessity of considering the impact of childlessness in co-occurrence with other life domains.

## **6.3 Discussion of findings**

### *6.3.1 Contribution to childlessness research*

This book has contributed to research on childlessness in several ways. In this section, I discuss the two theoretical and three methodological merits of this study that follow from my approach to childlessness.

The first theoretical merit of this study is the focus on life histories. One of the main objectives of this book was to find out who the childless were. Applying a life course perspective, and especially by making use of the notion of cumulative contingencies, I moved away from a focus on current behavior and circumstances, shifting the focus towards specific pathways into childlessness. Consistent with the notion of cumulative contingencies (Dannefer, 2003; Heinz, 1997; O'Rand, 1996), I found out that circumstances earlier in life and successive steps taken in life shape the likelihood of remaining childless. Beyond the common knowledge that absence of a partner during one's fertile years makes it more likely that individuals remain childless, I showed that having had multiple partnerships increases the likelihood of remaining childless for both women and men (Chapter 2).

The second theoretical merit of this study is the investigation of childlessness in the contexts of people's life courses. With the notion of interdependencies, the life course perspective sheds light on the co-occurrence of transitions and behavior. Contrary to

previous work, which tended to examine childlessness in relative isolation, I explicitly acknowledged that interdependencies across domains should be taken into account. In this dissertation, I focused explicitly on interdependencies between parental history and work transitions, and those between parental and partnership history (Chapter 4 and 5 respectively). In Chapter 4 I found that the transition out of employment rather than the entry into parenthood caused new mothers' feelings of well-being to deteriorate. In Chapter 5 I saw that the implications of childlessness for middle-aged men depended heavily on their partnership history. Noteworthy, the consequences of remaining childless were often completely attributable to not having (had) a partner. These findings stressed the importance of disentangling partnership status and parental status.

The first methodological merit of this study and one that has clear substantive implications is the explicit consideration of men on the subject of childlessness. The life course perspective, with the notion of interdependencies across life trajectories, suggested that diversity in pathways and life outcomes are likely to be present between childless men and women. However, the literature on childlessness has been restricted to women. The explicit focus on men in this dissertation in connection to the focus on women, made it possible to contrast the pathways into and life outcomes of childlessness between women and men. My work indeed revealed that large differences exist between childless women and men, in line with explanations provided by the life course perspective: The life course's suggestion that women experience stronger difficulties of combining their family and working life than men matched the findings in Chapter 2 where I saw that for women having a continuous career does not easily go hand in hand with having children, whereas having a career appears to be a prerequisite for the transition into parenthood for men. The suggestion that women's and men's lives are patterned differently is met in Chapter 3. The results there showed that women are kin keepers irrespectively of parental status, whereas children are needed to activate men's involvement with their extended family.

The second methodological merit of this study concerns the definition of childlessness. Where scholars in previous work have confounded different types of childless individuals (temporarily versus permanent, permanent versus empty nesters, biological versus adopted), I have distinguished these different groups. Specifically, in Chapter 5 I made distinctions between childless men, resident fathers and empty nest fathers. Parenthood had the strongest impact on the lives of resident fathers. Aside from the strong beneficial impact of having children on men's economic life for both resident and empty nest fathers, there were little differences between childless men and empty nest fathers, suggesting that fatherhood affects men's lives mainly through the active involvement with children. This implies that the influence of fatherhood is only applicable to the years in which fathers co-reside with their children and that the impact of fatherhood wears off

afterwards. Observed inequalities between resident fathers and childless men in well-being and community involvement will therefore most likely only be temporary. In all, the consideration of fathers' life course stage, in the sense of co-residing arrangements, turned out to be a prerequisite for understanding why parenthood impacts men's lives.

As a third and final methodological merit, I looked at a wide range of life outcomes of childlessness; from social activities, to family life and from psychical and psychological health to income and work. This provided us with a broad perspective on the implications of childlessness. In line with other scholars, I found that the implications of childlessness depend heavily on the outcome studied (Dykstra, 1997; Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007a). In Chapter 3, I found that voluntarily childless women only reported weaker feelings of universal, not personal familial responsibility. In Chapter 4, I found a positive impact of entering motherhood for negative affect, but detrimental impact of entering parenthood for partnership satisfaction and partner conflicts, although the impact of entering motherhood disappeared when I controlled for partner status and work hour transitions. In Chapter 5, finally, I saw that fatherhood did not influence men's contact with family members and neighbors, nor had an influence on men's health. Fatherhood was positively associated with men's involvement in the community, and their work hours and income, but negatively associated with men's psychological well-being. From this it follows that focusing only on one domain of life or on a single outcome of childlessness yields a too narrow view of the ways in which remaining without children affects one's life. Incorporating a wide range of life domains and a wide range of outcome measures enabled me to see that childlessness affects different dimensions of life differently.

### *6.3.2 Policy implications*

In this section, I suggest some policy implications that follow from this study. Childlessness may have implications for societies in three different ways and therefore I focus on three types of policies, in relation to the three broad questions of modernization, social inequality and social cohesion. First, I will turn to the implications that this study has for policies that aim to encourage childbearing. Although designing and recommending policies to modify childbearing behavior is quite the challenge, my findings provide some suggestions that may facilitate the transition into parenthood. Second, I will focus on policies aiming to increase social cohesion. The childless are assumed to be less integrated in society and their numbers are expected to increase. These notions led to concerns about social cohesion in society. Do my findings justify these concerns and do they provide tools for designing policies to improve social cohesion? Third, childlessness can be seen as a marker of inequality. In the final section of this paragraph I discuss the implications of this study for policies focused on reducing inequality in society.

*Policies aimed at increasing fertility.* What policy implications do the outcomes of this study on childlessness have? It is important to note first that some childless individuals are not likely to be influenced at all by policy to encourage childbearing. In general, there always is a small percentage in society who decides at an early stage that they do not want to have children and subsequently refrain from having children, the so-called early articulators (Houseknecht, 1978), but the actual percentage of early articulators in society is unknown. Another small percentage of childless individuals (4 %) have reduced fecundity, which is likely to be due to postponement of childbearing (Beets, 2006). For these individuals, fertility rates might be enhanced by increasing the availability and lowering the costs of fertility treatments (Hoorens, Gallo, & Cave, 2007; Sobotka et al., 2008). Education campaigns concerning the risks of delaying pregnancy might also work (Beets, 2007; McDonald, 2006a). The greatest proportion of individuals remains childless because of circumstances and behavior during their life course, as I showed in Chapter 2. The findings in this chapter suggested that individuals are not the ‘captains’ of their own biography, in contrast to what modernization processes had suggested. Circumstances, amongst others in the occupational domain, play a substantial role in remaining childless. As was shown in Chapter 2, continuous employment and childbearing are quite incompatible for women. Therefore, the availability of generous maternity leaves, access to affordable and good-quality child care, and guarantees of returning to the level of employment before childbirth might be policy measures that boost women’s transition to parenthood. The latter might especially be important in the light of the findings in Chapter 4. It is often thought that women’s occupational career attenuates fertility rates and that employment decreases happiness for mothers. The results in Chapter 4 contrast these images; new mothers report more positive affect when they increase their hours of work and show declined levels of partnership well-being because of labor market exists. The contemporary positive correlation between fertility levels and female employment witnessed on a macro-level (Castles, 2003) underlines that motherhood and a professional career can go hand in hand. Ensuring that new mothers can easily return to the labor market is preferable in the light of enhancing fertility rates, and also for new mothers’ own well-being. The findings in chapter 2 showed that unemployment hampers men’s transition into parenthood. McDonald (2006a, 2006b) showed that feelings of insecurity about employment, makes individuals decide to postpone childbearing or abandon the thought of having children completely. Longer security of job tenure and the elimination of very short-term contracts might help to increase feelings of security among men and therefore boost men’s fertility (McDonald, 2006a). Providing more occupational security, may result in a larger share of personal choice in the decision to have children.

*Policies aimed at increasing social cohesion.* Do the present findings suggest that differences between those with and those without children lead to differences in ties with society at large? In Chapter 5 I found that childlessness made a difference, albeit small, in the lives of men. Childless men stand out in that they appear to have individualistic life styles. Men who have never had children seem to be less involved in community activities. As Eggebeen and Uhlenberg (1985) have previously pointed out, those without regular ties to children appear to show less concern about the welfare of their community. However, the commitment of fathers to the community is restricted to the period in which they co-reside with their children. This implies that childless men are no different from fathers when the latter no longer live with their children. These results may mitigate any worries about a disintegrating society in relation to an increasing number of childless individuals, an assumption that is further strengthened by the findings in Chapter 4. This chapter firstly showed that not all childless individuals, only those who voluntarily choose for a childless life, report lower level of familial responsibility. Second, it showed that voluntarily childless women are no less committed to their own family in comparison to women with children. In sum, these findings do not show differences between childless individuals and parents in terms of what people are willing to do for each other, and policy measures therefore seem gratuitously.

*Policies aimed at decreasing inequality.* Policies might also be implemented to reduce inequality between individuals based on their parental status. The treatment of parental status as an indicator of social inequality has been novel, as earlier work mainly uses parental status as a socio-demographic variable. The findings in Chapter 5 suggest that parental status warrants greater attention in analyses of socioeconomic inequality in middle age. Where previous research has consistently shown that permanent childlessness is associated with strong socio-economic positions for women, especially the never married (Dykstra & Hagestad, 2007b), my findings show an opposite pattern for men. Childless men earn considerably less money in comparison to resident and non-resident fathers. Inequality in terms of physical health between fathers and childless men was not observed. However, fathers were in a healthier condition than childless men, but this was due to a higher likelihood of being under the ‘social control’ of a partner. For all men, irrespectively of parental status, health may become vulnerable when they lose the protection of the presence of a partner. Against the backdrop of rising divorce rates and a rise in the number of single fathers, policies that aim to enhance healthy behaviours among unpartnered men might be welcome.

## 6.4 Suggestions for future research

This section on suggestions for future research is divided into two parts. In the first part I discuss six suggestions for future research that flow from the limitations of this study. The remainder of this section entails three suggestions for future research that are based on the present findings.

### *6.4.1. Limitation-based suggestions for future research*

The first limitation of this study is that cross-sectional data were used for the majority of the empirical chapters in this book to gain insight into the pathways and life outcomes of childlessness. Caution is needed when drawing conclusions on causal relations based on data at only one point in time. Theoretical considerations led me to assume causal relations, such as parenthood leading to more contacts with family members. To test this, longitudinal data would of course be necessary. After all, extensive contacts with family members may also enhance the wish for procreation oneself, reversing the causal order. When I conducted the majority of my analyses, only the first wave of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Data was available. At the time of writing, the second wave of the NKPS is widely available and longitudinal analyses can be performed to test the causal relations more directly. Noteworthy, the collection of data for the third wave of the NKPS is scheduled to start in the beginning of 2010. The availability of three waves makes it possible to test causal relationship in an even more sophisticated way.

A second limitation is that I focused on social determinants of childlessness. A small proportion of individuals is infertile and for those individuals choices concerning having biological children are irrelevant. About 2 to 4 per cent of Dutch couples are infertile (Beets, 2006). Infertility may have an impact on the choices people make in their lives. For example, infertile women may dedicate themselves more strongly to their occupational careers. The marital careers of infertile individuals may also differ from those who are able to conceive children; relationships may end because desire for a biological child might make a spouse leave their infertile partner. And of course, the knowledge that never having biological children is a *fait accompli* may have a strong detrimental impact on feelings of well-being (McQuillan, Greil, White, & Jacob, 2003; McQuillan, Torres Stone, & Greil, 2007). Unfortunately, the NKPS dataset did not include questions on infertility. Therefore, on the basis of my data, no conclusions could be drawn on the extent to which childlessness is the result of infertility. Future research focusing on the pathways and life outcomes of childlessness would benefit from the ability to distinguish infertile from fertile individuals.

The fact that this study has dealt only with biological childlessness can be seen as a third limitation. In the NKPS, stepchildren were only considered to be stepchildren, and

information was only retrieved from them, when step-children lived together with the new partner of their biological parents. Partly because of this, the number of stepchildren in the NKPS was low. In general, knowledge on the impact of step-parenthood on people's lives is limited (Demo & Cox, 2000; Marsiglio, Amato, Day, & Lamb, 2000). In the Netherlands, this is partly attributable to the fact that the number of stepchildren in the lives of contemporary individuals is small, as a result of the relatively low divorce rates in the Netherlands compared to other countries. Another reason for the lack of knowledge on stepchildren concerns the difficulty of identifying them. Who are they? Do only individuals who co-reside with the new partner of their biological parent count as stepchildren or should we leave living arrangements out of consideration? Progress in the childlessness literature can be made by focusing on step-parenthood. Progress should also be made, as divorce and remarriage rates are still rising (Juby & Le Bourdais, 1998; Liefbroer, 1999; Rendall et al., 2001; Stacey, 1990). It would be very interesting to scrutinize the consequences of step-parenthood; does it make a difference whether the transition to parenthood is biological or social? In the NKPS, about 12 per cent of childless respondents have partners who have children out of earlier relationships. From an evolutionary perspective, people would benefit the most from biological children, in the sense that one's genes are passed on. Children are mostly valued because of the love and affection they give and provoke (Bulatao, 1981; Fawcett, 1988; Hoffman & Manis, 1979). Does entering biological parenthood, *ceteris paribus*, provoke more loving feelings and does it lead to more positive feelings of well-being in comparison to becoming a parent to whom one has no biological ties?

A fourth limitation of this study is a focus on individuals rather than on couples. Of course, at least in the majority of cases, entrance into parenthood is not an individual, but a joint transition (Rijken, 2009). And where two individuals are involved, differences are not only likely to be found in the wishes, plans and intentions for having children, but also in the felt impact of having children. The present results showed that the impact of parenthood is felt differently by women and men. However, these individuals were not part of a couple. It might be the case that women and men within the same couple experience fewer differences. Although there are many studies that take a couple perspective when investigating why and when people have children (Coombs & Chang, 1981; Corijn, Liefbroer, & Jong Gierveld, 1996; Jansen, 2002; Morgan, 1985; Rijken, 2009; Thomson, 1997; Thomson, McDonald, & Bumpass, 1990), few have focused on those couples that remain childless. Future research should benefit from a couple-perspective on the pathways into and the life outcomes of childlessness.

Fifth, I focused on the causes and consequences of childlessness in the Netherlands only. As a result, I could identify individual differences in pathways and life outcomes of childlessness, but I was unable to scrutinize whether these pathways and outcomes were

also influenced by policies, laws and economic circumstances on a macro-level. These factors may influence the extent to which people are able to integrate having children into their personal lives and the extent to which childlessness makes itself felt in other life domains. With my cross-sectional data, I was able to come up with some policy recommendations which may enhance the likelihood that people enter parenthood. Cross-national comparative research that assesses whether and which policy measures influence the likelihood of entering parenthood would be of great scientific and societal relevance.

The sixth and final limitation of this study concerns the fact that I did not focus on ethnic differences. In this book I made use of the main sample of the Netherlands Kinship Panel Study, which is a random sample of individuals in private households in the Netherlands. I did not to make use of the separate migrant sample, consisting of respondents from the four largest migrant groups in the Netherlands: respondents of Turkish, Moroccan, Surinamese or Antillean origin. The rationale for only making use of data of the random sample was that there was too little information on childlessness, life histories, and life outcomes of individuals from the migrant sample to obtain a grasp of ethnic differences in the pathways to and the consequences of childlessness. However, it is known that among Antillean and Surinamese mothers, the percentage of single mothers is much higher than among native Dutch mothers (SCP/CBS, 2009). As research has shown that single parents have lower levels of well-being than those with a partner (Amato, 2000; Hughes, 1989; Kohler et al., 2005; McLanahan & Adams, 1987), it is likely that among Antillean and Surinamese mothers there will be a higher percentage with lower levels of well-being in comparison to their Dutch counterparts. This suggests that studies that incorporate ethnicity when assessing differences between parents and childless individuals would be a welcome addition to the literature.

#### *6.4.2. Findings-based suggestions for future research*

Social-scientific research on childlessness has largely focused on women (Bulcroft & Teachman, 2003). With this book, I have contributed to the developing literature on childless men. When men are included in research on fertility, emphasis is often only placed on differences between men and women, while differences in the group of men are glossed over. This study reveals that taking into account differences between men is very important for understanding the implications childlessness and fatherhood have.

First, the present results show that depending on partner history, living arrangements and employment history, fatherhood may have completely different implications. Differences between men may also be based on preferences, in a similar way as Hakim has sketched for women (Hakim, 2003). For some men, employment may be the most central part of their identity, whereas for others fatherhood may play this role. How men perceive themselves and which aspects of their identity are most important for them may

have strong implications for the impact of childlessness or fatherhood on their lives. A qualitative study on men's identities in relation to childbearing decisions and processes could be very useful for answering this specific question.

Second, differences between the experiences of childlessness and fatherhood are likely to vary over time. Scholars suggest that fatherhood is becoming more important in the lives of young men these days (Doherty et al., 1998; Fox & Bruce, 2001; Knijn & Selten, 2002). Not only do new fathers help out their partner more with child care than they did some decades ago, but the percentage of fathers who take up some structural parental leave 'a weekly daddy-day' to solely take care of their infant has also increased over the years (CBS, 2008a). This might imply that fatherhood has a more substantial influence on the lives of contemporary men in comparison to that of men from older cohorts. Studies that focus on the impact of fatherhood over time would therefore be a welcome addition to the literature.

Third, the implications of fatherhood should explicitly be studied in tandem with partner status. This study reveals that childless men are worse off than fathers, but this is mainly due to the benefits linked with having a partner, which the latter more often have. Against the backdrop of an increase in out-of-wedlock births (Kiernan, 2004; Smith et al., 1996; Smock, 2000; US Census Bureau, 2004) and the rise in divorce rates (CBS, 2006; Latten & Kreijen, 2001; Sardon & Robertson, 2002; US Census Bureau, 2003) concerns have been expressed about contemporary fathers (Baskerville, 2004; Gillis, 2000; Hobson, 2002; Marsiglio et al., 2000; Parke, 2004). Most concerns are expressed from the standpoint of children (Blankenhorn, 1995; Doherty et al., 1998; Gillis, 2000; Greene & Biddlecom, 2000). The fact that more and more fathers are living without a partner or children (Jensen, 1998) may also have important consequences for the fathers themselves. Many of these fathers may have no or only little interaction with their children. Rowland (1998) speaks of functional childlessness to identify parents who have no contact with their offspring. Without the presence of children or a partner, men may be under much less social control to behave in healthy ways. They may also be less integrated socially, as it is often the woman who binds their partner to their family and to the larger community. Furthermore, these men may be less committed to their occupational career, as they do not have to provide for a family. Future research would benefit from examining what the consequences of such functional childlessness are for men's lives.



## Samenvatting (summary in Dutch)

In discussies rond vruchtbaarheid, wordt de aandacht voornamelijk gericht op wanneer en hoeveel kinderen mensen krijgen. De vraag óf mensen kinderen krijgen wordt veel minder vaak voor het voetlicht gebracht. Veel onderzoekers nemen aan dat een hoog percentage kinderloosheid op macroniveau correspondeert met een laag kindertal. Onderzoek toont echter aan dat deze aanname onjuist is. Veel onderzoek op het microniveau start vanuit het perspectief van de familiecyclus, welk resulteert in een kijk op ouderschap waarin mensen die geen kinderen krijgen buiten beschouwing blijven. Dit proefschrift stelt zich tot doel kinderloosheid zichtbaar te maken. De volgende hoofdvraag wordt beantwoord:

*Wat zijn de oorzaken en gevolgen van kinderloosheid?*

*Relevantie.* Het onderzoeken van de oorzaken en gevolgen van kinderloosheid heeft zowel maatschappelijke als wetenschappelijke relevantie. Op maatschappelijk vlak zijn er twee samenhangende redenen te geven. De eerste reden betreft het grote aantal mensen dat in de hedendaagse maatschappij kinderloos zal blijven. Hoewel één op elke vijf Nederlanders nooit kinderen zal krijgen, is de kennis over kinderloosheid zeer beperkt. De tweede reden betreft het belang van kennis over kinderloosheid voor beleidsmakers. Begrip van de achtergrondkenmerken en levenspaden van ongewenst en gewenst kinderlozen kan beleidsmakers handvaten geven om een groep individuen te bereiken die met beleidsmaatregelen wellicht kinderen zouden hebben gekregen.

Het bestuderen van de oorzaken en gevolgen van kinderlozen heeft om twee redenen ook wetenschappelijke relevantie. De eerste reden is dat mensen die in de huidige samenleving kinderloos blijven hoogstwaarschijnlijk andere kenmerken hebben dan individuen die een aantal decennia geleden kinderloos bleven. En waar de eigenschappen van kinderloze individuen veranderd zijn, zijn de gevolgen van kinderloosheid dit mogelijk ook. De weinige onderzoeken naar kinderloosheid stammen voornamelijk uit de jaren 70 en 80 van de vorige eeuw. Nieuw recent onderzoek is nodig om de levenspaden naar en de levensuitkomsten van kinderloosheid in de hedendaagse samenleving te begrijpen.

Deze studie naar kinderloosheid heeft ook wetenschappelijke relevantie vanwege het inzicht dat verschaft kan worden in de drie grote vraagstukken van de sociologie: modernisering, sociale cohesie en ongelijkheid. Aandacht richten op de antecedenten van kinderloosheid kan licht schijnen op de vraag of de moderne mens wel zo vrij is in zijn keuzes als vaak wordt gedacht. Onderzoek naar kinderloosheid kan ook inzicht

verschaffen in de mate waarin het al dan niet hebben van kinderen bijdraagt aan de sterkte van bindingen in de samenleving. Tenslotte kan een studie naar de levensuitkomsten van kinderloosheid bijdragen aan het antwoord op de vraag of het al dan niet hebben van kinderen van invloed is op het creëren van verschillen in welbevinden.

*Doel van het onderzoek.* Het doel van dit onderzoek is tweeledig. Ten eerste tracht ik uit te zoeken welke antecedenten leiden tot een kinderloos bestaan. In plaats van een dichotoom onderscheid tussen vrijwillige en onvrijwillige kinderloosheid, welke karakteristiek is voor het bestaande onderzoek naar kinderloosheid, richt ik mij op levenspaden die leiden naar kinderloosheid. Door de levenspaden naar kinderloosheid te vergelijken met de levenspaden naar ouderschap, hoop ik te identificeren wie de kinderlozen zijn; het eerste doel van dit proefschrift. Het tweede doel is uitzoeken welke gevolgen kinderloosheid heeft; voor familie- en gemeenschapsbanden, en voor psychologisch, fysiek, sociaal en economisch welbevinden.

*Benadering.* De levenspaden naar en de gevolgen van kinderloosheid worden bestudeerd vanuit het levensloopperspectief. In dit perspectief wordt individueel gedrag gezien als ingebed in dynamische inter-afhankelijke levenscontexten. In dit onderzoek maak ik gebruik van inzichten uit het levensloopperspectief die zich richten op individuele levenslopen. Ten eerste benadrukt dit perspectief dat iemands eerdere gedrag en omstandigheden de verdere richting van de levensloop bepalen. Hoe lang mensen een opleiding volgen, of en wanneer mensen werk hebben, en wanneer zij wel of geen partner hebben in hun leven zijn vanuit het levensloop perspectief zeer relevant om te begrijpen waarom mensen kinderloos blijven. Ten tweede benadrukt dit perspectief dat gedragingen in één domein, bijvoorbeeld het krijgen van kinderen, sterk samen met gedragingen en omstandigheden in andere domeinen, zoals het werkdomein en het relatiedomein.

*Innovatie.* Dit onderzoek is zowel op theoretische als methodologische gronden innovatief op het gebied van kinderloosheid. De levensloopbenadering van kinderloosheid leidt tot twee theoretische innovaties. De eerste innovatie betreft het bestuderen van levenspaden. Bestaand onderzoek heeft vooral gebruik gemaakt van kennis over de huidige omstandigheden van individuen om begrip over kinderloosheid te vergaren. Het levensloopperspectief benadrukt juist dat huidig gedrag een voortvloeiende is van eerdere gedragingen en omstandigheden. Een eenzijdige blik op huidige omstandigheden kan ertoe leiden dat belangrijke omstandigheden in eerdere stadia van de levensloop over het hoofd worden gezien. Ik kijk in dit proefschrift verder dan huidige

omstandigheden en maak gebruik van de levensgeschiedenissen van mensen om te bevatten welke paden leiden tot een kinderloos bestaan. De tweede theoretische innovatie betreft het goed in ogenschouw nemen van omstandigheden in andere levensdomeinen bij de bestudering van de gevolgen van kinderloosheid. Het maakt veel uit voor iemands levensuitkomsten of deze persoon binnen of buiten een relatie kinderloos is gebleven. Eerder onderzoek is vaak niet in staat gebleken om ouderschapsstatus en partnerstatus in analyses van elkaar te scheiden. In het onderhavige proefschrift wordt dit onderscheid wel gemaakt.

Drie methodologische innovaties kunnen ook nog worden genoemd. Ten eerste richt dit proefschrift zich op kinderloze vrouwen én mannen. In bestaand onderzoek zijn mannen veelal niet meegenomen – vooral omdat werd gedacht dat zij minder nauwkeurig konden rapporteren over hun vruchtbaarheid, maar ook omdat werd gedacht dat het al dan niet hebben van kinderen van minder invloed zou zijn op de levensuitkomsten van mannen dan op die van vrouwen. Ik betwijfel of deze aanname terecht is en verwacht dat kinderloosheid eerder een andere dan een mindere uitwerking heeft op mannen. De tweede methodologische innovatie van dit proefschrift betreft de operationalisering van kinderloosheid. Bestaand onderzoek heeft vaak geen aandacht gehad voor op welk punt kinderlozen zich in hun levensloop bevonden, waardoor mensen die de transitie naar ouderschap vanuit biologisch oogpunt nog konden maken werden samengenomen met diegenen die permanent kinderloos zijn. Anderen keken alleen naar het aantal kinderen in het huishouden, waardoor het verschil tussen mensen zonder kinderen en diegenen zonder thuiswonende kinderen niet kon worden gemaakt. In dit proefschrift wordt rekening gehouden met de levensloofase waarin kinderloze individuen zich bevinden. Ten derde richt ik mijn blik in dit proefschrift op diverse levensuitkomsten. Het is mogelijk dat de invloed van kinderloosheid verschilt naar gelang de uitkomst die wordt bestudeerd. Een te eenzijdige blik maakt het onmogelijk om enige nuance te zien in het effect dat kinderloosheid heeft. In dit proefschrift komen diverse levensuitkomsten aan de orde; van familiegevoelens in hoofdstuk 3, psychologisch welbevinden in hoofdstuk 4, tot fysiek, sociaal en financieel welbevinden in hoofdstuk 5.

*Data.* De data die gebruikt worden om de onderzoeksvragen te beantwoorden zijn afkomstig van de Netherlands Kinship Panel Study (NKPS). De NKPS is een grootschalig onderzoek naar familiebanden. De NKPS bestaat uit twee steekproeven; één steekproef onder de gehele bevolking en één migrantensteekproef. De resultaten in dit proefschrift zijn gebaseerd op data van de bevolkingssteekproef. Deze dataverzameling startte in 2002, onder een representatieve steekproef van volwassenen tussen de 18 en 79 jaar. In de eerste ronde zijn 8161 Nederlanders geïnterviewd. De respons van deze ronde

was 45 %. De tweede ronde vond plaats tussen 2006 en 2007 en had een respons van 74 %.

De grootte van het databestand maakt het mogelijk om gedetailleerd te kijken naar de levenspaden die leiden tot kinderloosheid. Ook stelt het mij in staat om de gevolgen van kinderloosheid te onderzoeken in samenhang met gedragingen en omstandigheden in andere levensdomeinen, zoals partnerschapstatus. Hoofdstuk 2 en 5 maken gebruik van data afkomstig van ronde 1, hoofdstuk 3 maakt gebruik van data uit ronde 2 en in hoofdstuk 4 tenslotte is gebruik gemaakt van data uit beide rondes.

*Onderzoeksvragen.* De onderzoeksvragen die worden beantwoord in de vier empirische hoofdstukken zijn elk gekoppeld aan een van de drie grote sociologische vragen. Mijn eerste onderzoeksvraag plaatst zich rond het moderniseringsvraagstuk en is gericht op de gedragingen en omstandigheden die leiden tot een kinderloos bestaan. De tweede onderzoeksvraag betreft sociale cohesie en richt zich op verschillen tussen mensen met en zonder kinderen in gevoelens van verantwoordelijkheid voor familie. De derde en vierde onderzoeksvragen betreffen beide het ongelijkheidvraagstuk en onderzoeken respectievelijk of het al dan niet hebben van kinderen van invloed is op verschillen in welbevinden van individuen en levensuitkomsten van mannen.

*Levenspaden die leiden tot een kinderloos bestaan.* In veel onderzoek naar kinderlozen wordt de reden waarom mensen kinderloos zijn uitgedrukt in een keuze; iemand is vrijwillig of onvrijwillig kinderloos. In hoofdstuk 2 stap ik, geleid door het levenslopperspectief, af van deze benadering. In dit hoofdstuk wordt kinderloosheid niet beschouwd als een enkele keuze om wel of geen kinderen te nemen, maar gezien als het resultaat van een dynamisch proces van gedrag en omstandigheden gedurende de levensloop. Omdat de periode waarin vrouwen biologisch in staat zijn om kinderen te krijgen korter is dan die van mannen en omdat vrouwen over het algemeen sterkere interafhankelijkheden ervaren tussen hun werkende leven en het krijgen van kinderen, worden de levenspaden die leiden tot kinderloosheid afzonderlijk voor vrouwen en mannen bestudeerd. De onderzoeksvraag luidt: Welke opleidings-, werk- en relationele paden leiden tot kinderloosheid en zijn deze paden verschillend voor vrouwen en mannen?

Om deze vraag te beantwoorden, wordt gebruik gemaakt van gegevens uit de eerste ronde van de NKPS. De steekproef bestaat uit 2867 vrouwen en 2195 mannen tussen de 40 en 79 jaar. Logistische regressie analyses worden uitgevoerd om de hoofdvraag te beantwoorden.

Uit de resultaten blijkt dat de levenspaden die leiden tot kinderloosheid inderdaad verschillen tussen mannen en vrouwen. Een hoge opleiding vergroot de kans om kinderlos te blijven alleen voor vrouwen en niet voor mannen. Een ononderbroken

carrière blijkt een voorwaarde voor mannen te zijn om de transitie naar ouderschap te maken. Voor vrouwen daarentegen vergroot het de kans dat zij kinderloos blijven. Een alleenstaand bestaan vergroot logischerwijs de kans om kinderloos te blijven, waarbij dit effect voor mannen sterker is dan voor vrouwen. Verder blijkt dat voor vrouwen en -- in sterkere mate -- voor mannen het hebben gehad van verschillende partners gedurende de levensloop de kans om kinderloos te blijven vergroot. Voor zowel mannen als vrouwen geldt dat hoe meer jaren zij alleenstaand zijn, hoe groter de kans is dat zij kinderloos eindigen.

Uit deze studie blijkt dat sommige levenspaden leiden tot een kinderloos bestaan, terwijl andere juist een voorwaarde zijn om de transitie naar ouderschap te maken. Niet alle paden zijn het resultaat van actieve keuzes; werkloosheid en het verbreken van relaties zijn zaken die mensen kunnen overkomen. Dit suggereert dat kinderloosheid een subtiel interactief proces is en geen keuze die iemand op één moment in zijn of haar leven maakt.

*Kinderloosheid en gevoelens van verantwoordelijkheid ten opzichte van familie.* Vaak wordt gedacht dat kinderlozen individualistisch zijn en niet veel voor hun medemens over hebben. In hoofdstuk 3 probeer ik erachter te komen of dit stereotype overeenkomsten vertoont met de werkelijkheid door te onderzoeken of mensen zonder kinderen verschillen van mensen met kinderen met betrekking tot gevoelens van verantwoordelijkheid ten opzichte van hun familie. De onderzoeksvraag luidt: Hebben kinderlozen sterkere of zwakkere gevoelens van verantwoordelijkheid voor hun familie in vergelijking met mensen met kinderen? En liggen processen van selectie of adaptatie ten grondslag aan deze verschillen? Deze tweede vraag wordt gesteld om erachter te komen waarom kinderlozen zouden verschillen van ouders. Hebben kinderlozen, specifiek zij die al van jongs af aan weten dat zij geen kinderen willen, eigenschappen waardoor zij verschillen in hun verantwoordelijkheidsgevoelens voor hun familie? Of zorgt de transitie naar ouderschap ervoor dat verantwoordelijkheidsgevoelens veranderen?

Om dit te onderzoeken, wordt onderscheid gemaakt tussen vrijwillige en onvrijwillige kinderloosheid, als aangegeven door de respondent. Gebruik wordt gemaakt van de tweede ronde van de NKPS. Twee verschillende steekproeven worden gebruikt: Één onder 1505 vrouwen en 1181 mannen die nog in hun vruchtbare jaren zitten en waarbij kinderloos zijn nog een tijdelijke status kan zijn en één onder 1564 vrouwen en 915 mannen van wie de ouderschapsstatus al vaststaat. Twee vormen van verantwoordelijkheidsgevoelens ten opzichte van familie worden onderzocht. De variabele universele verantwoordelijkheidsgevoelens verwijst naar opvattingen over algemene normen over hoe verantwoordelijk familieleden zich naar elkaar toe behoren te gedragen. De variabele persoonlijke verantwoordelijkheidsgevoelens betreft de uiting van

verantwoordelijkheidsgevoelens ten opzichte van de eigen familie. Multiple classificatie analyses worden uitgevoerd, waarbij de gemiddelden worden gecontroleerd voor opleidingsniveau, partner status en religie.

De resultaten tonen aan dat alleen vrijwillig kinderlozen, en niet onvrijwillig kinderlozen, zwakkere gevoelens van verantwoordelijkheid voor familie uitdrukken in vergelijking met ouders. Dit onderstreept aan dat om te begrijpen welke uitwerking kinderlosheden heeft op het gedrag en de gevoelens van individuen, kennis met betrekking tot de vrijwillige dan wel onvrijwillige aard van kinderlosheden nodig is. Het geeft ook aan dat in de meeste gevallen selectie, en niet adaptatie, ten grondslag ligt aan verschillen tussen kinderlozen en ouders.

Maar, sterke adaptatie-effecten worden wel gevonden. In de steekproef onder mannen van wie de ouderschapstatus vast staat, laten de resultaten zien dat vaders veel sterker uiting geven aan gevoelens van verantwoordelijkheid ten opzichte van hun familie in vergelijking met vrijwillig en onvrijwillig kinderloze mannen. Waar het hebben van kinderen de familieverantwoordelijkheid van mannen aanwakkert, wordt eenzelfde effect niet gevonden bij vrouwen. Wellicht ligt hieraan ten grondslag het fenomeen dat vrouwen over het algemeen al zeer betrokken zijn bij hun eigen familie, ongeacht hun ouderschapstatus.

Wanneer de resultaten van algemene normen over familieverantwoordelijkheid worden vergeleken met die van de persoonlijke verantwoordelijkheid, is het contrast bij vrouwen groot. Vrijwillig kinderloze vrouwen verschillen niet van moeders met betrekking tot persoonlijke verantwoordelijkheidsgevoelens, maar geven uiting van minder sterke algemene normen over familieverantwoordelijkheid. Dit suggereert dat vrijwillig kinderloze vrouwen anderen geen verantwoordelijkheid willen opleggen; dat iedereen voor zich moet bepalen hoe verantwoordelijk hij of zij is voor familie. Zo gezien, hebben kinderloze vrouwen inderdaad individualistische eigenschappen, maar dan zonder de negatieve connotatie van het vermijden van verantwoordelijkheid voor anderen.

*De transitie naar ouderschap en welbevinden.* In hoofdstuk 4 wordt ingegaan op de vraag of ouderschap leidt tot verschillen in welbevinden. De onderzoeksvraag luidt: Op welke wijze en in welke mate beïnvloedt de transitie naar ouderschap gevoelens van welbevinden?

De literatuur heeft tot op heden nog geen eenduidig antwoord kunnen verschaffen. In mijn visie is helderheid te verkrijgen door het effect van ouderschap op welbevinden te bestuderen vanuit een levenslopperspectief. De transitie naar ouderschap hangt vaak samen met transities op relatie- en werkgebied. Veel mensen trouwen voorafgaand aan de komst van hun baby en voornamelijk vrouwen passen hun werkuren aan op het hebben van kinderen. Uit de literatuur komt naar voren dat zulke transities grote invloed hebben

op gevoelens van welbevinden. Echter, in onderzoek naar de gevolgen van ouderschap voor welbevinden zijn zulke transities niet eerder meegenomen.

Om te onderzoeken in hoeverre de transitie naar ouderschap en transities op relationeel en werkgebied het welbevinden van mensen beïnvloeden, maak ik gebruik van data uit beide rondes van de NKPS. De steekproef bestaat uit 338 kinderloze vrouwen en 262 kinderloze mannen onder 45 jaar ten tijde van de eerste ronde van de NKPS. 6 metingen van welbevinden zijn gebruikt; van eenzaamheid tot levenstevredenheid en van tevredenheid met de partner relatie tot het aantal conflicten dat respondenten aangaven te hebben gehad met hun partner. Fixed effect analyses worden uitgevoerd.

De resultaten tonen aan dat de transitie naar ouderschap geen grote invloed heeft op gevoelens van welbevinden. Voor zover significante effect naar voren komen, zijn deze niet te wijten aan de transitie naar ouderschap, maar aan transities op het relationele en het werkvlak. Voor vrouwen geldt bijvoorbeeld dat het verlies van de werkrol en niet zozeer de transitie naar ouderschap zorgt voor een verminderd welbevinden.

Vergelijking van de uitkomsten voor de verschillende metingen van welbevinden toont aan dat de transitie naar ouderschap zowel positieve als negatieve gevolgen heeft voor vrouwen. Voor mannen komen alleen negatieve gevolgen voor hun welbevinden naar voren. Waar eerder onderzoek vaak aantoont dat de transitie naar ouderschap een grotere invloed heeft op het leven van vrouwen dan dat van mannen, zien we hier op het vlak van welbevinden dat het effect ongeveer even groot is. Dit kan te maken hebben met de periode waarnaar ik heb gekeken. De meeste studies kijken alleen naar het eerste jaar na de geboorte van het kind, een periode waarin vooral voor vrouwen zeer veel verandert in hun leven. De ruimere blik in deze studie laat zien dat mannen in dezelfde mate worden geraakt door het krijgen van kinderen en de veranderingen die hiermee gepaard gaan als vrouwen.

*Levensuitkomsten van kinderloze mannen.* De kinderloosheidliteratuur kenmerkt zich door een expliciete gerichtheid op vrouwen. Over de invloed van kinderloosheid op het leven van mannen is nauwelijks iets bekend. Hoofdstuk 5 van dit proefschrift richt zich specifiek op mannen en stelt de vraag: Hoe verschillen de levensuitkomsten van kinderloze mannen op de lange termijn van vaders?

Ook wordt getracht om te begrijpen waarom kinderloze mannen van vaders verschillen. Sommige onderzoekers zijn van mening dat ouderschap mannen voorgoed verandert, terwijl anderen van mening zijn dat veranderingen zich beperken tot de periode waarin kinderen het huishouden delen met hun ouders. Om uit te vinden welk mechanisme ten grondslag ligt aan verschillen tussen kinderloze mannen en vaders, wordt onderscheid gemaakt tussen vaders met thuiswonende en zij met uitwonende kinderen.

Ook wordt de invloed van het al dan niet hebben van een partner expliciet in ogenschouw genomen. Vaders hebben over het algemeen vaker een partner dan kinderloze mannen en dit kenmerk en niet zozeer het hebben van kinderen zou ervoor kunnen zorgen dat vaders gunstigere levensuitkomsten hebben dan kinderloze mannen.

Om de levensuitkomsten van kinderloze mannen te onderzoeken, wordt gebruik gemaakt van gegevens uit de eerste ronde van de NKPS. De steekproef bestaat uit 1451 mannen tussen de 40 en 59 jaar. 4 levensdomeinen worden in ogenschouw genomen: sociale activiteiten, gezondheid, economische activiteiten en psychologisch welbevinden. Hiërarchische regressie analyses worden uitgevoerd om te kunnen zien of partner status in plaats van ouderschapsstatus de levensuitkomsten van mannen beïnvloedt.

De resultaten laten zien dat kinderloosheid leidt tot verschillen in de levens van mannen, maar deze verschillen zijn klein. Het grootste effect wordt gevonden op het economische vlak; kinderloze mannen verdienen minder dan vaders en werken minder uren dan vaders met uitwonende kinderen. Kinderloze mannen zijn bovendien minder betrokken bij de gemeenschap in verhouding tot vaders met thuiswonende kinderen. Maar, kinderloze mannen zijn wel iets gelukkiger dan vaders met thuiswonende kinderen.

Over het algemeen komt naar voren dat verschillen tussen kinderloze mannen en vaders toegeschreven kunnen worden aan partner status. Dit toont dat het hebben van kinderen het leven van mannen vooral indirect beïnvloedt door het verhogen van de kans dat zij een partner hebben. Deze bevinden benadrukken het belang van het bestuderen van kinderloosheid in samenhang met omstandigheden in andere levensdomeinen.

*Bijdrage aan de wetenschap.* Dit proefschrift heeft theoretisch en methodologisch bijgedragen aan onderzoek op het terrein van kinderloosheid. De eerste theoretische bijdrage betreft de gerichtheid op levenspaden. Deze studie bevestigt dat omstandigheden in de vroege fases van de levensloop en de stappen die hierna worden genomen van invloed zijn op de kans om kinderloos te eindigen. Dit proefschrift heeft ook theoretisch bijgedragen aan het begrip van de invloed van kinderloosheid op het leven van mensen door kinderloosheid expliciet te bestuderen in tandem met andere levensdomeinen. Of mensen een partner hebben, getrouwd zijn, werken etc. is van grote invloed gebleken op de hoe kinderloosheid wordt ervaren en daarmee welk effect kinderloosheid heeft op het leven van mensen.

De eerste methodologische bijdrage betreft de expliciete aandacht voor mannen. De levenspaden naar kinderloosheid evenals de gevolgen van kinderloosheid verschillen aanzienlijk tussen mannen en vrouwen. Dit proefschrift laat zien dat zowel vrouwen als mannen bestudeerd dienen te worden om te begrijpen welke levenspaden leiden tot kinderloosheid en welke invloed kinderloosheid heeft op het leven van mensen. Mannen verdienen expliciet en evenveel aandacht in onderzoek naar kinderloosheid. Een tweede

methodologische bijdrage is de operationalisering van kinderloosheid. In dit proefschrift is expliciet aandacht besteed aan de levenslooppfase van de respondenten; onderscheid wordt gemaakt tussen kinderlozen die de transitie naar ouderschap biologisch gezien nog zouden kunnen maken en zij die permanent kinderloos zijn. Ook zijn nuances aangebracht in de operationalisering van ouderschap door vaders met thuiswonende kinderen te scheiden van diegenen die alleen uitwonende kinderen hadden. Dit onderzoek heeft aangetoond dat het maken van zulk onderscheid noodzakelijk is, aangezien de gevolgen van kinderloosheid aanzienlijk verschilt tussen deze groepen. Ten derde, worden er in dit proefschrift verschillende levensuitkomsten van kinderloosheid bestudeerd. Door deze brede blik kon worden aangetoond dat de implicaties van kinderloosheid sterk afhangen van het levensdomein dat wordt bestudeerd.

*Beleidsaanbevelingen.* Naast nieuwe wetenschappelijke inzichten, kan dit proefschrift ook bijdragen aan beleid. Hoofdstuk 2 toont aan dat een carrière zonder onderbrekingen de kans om kinderloos te blijven voor vrouwen vergroot. Mogelijkheden creëren zodat jonge moeders eenvoudig kunnen terugkeren op de arbeidsmarkt, door middel van genereuze ouderschapsverloven, toegang tot goede en goedkope kinderopvang en baangarantie, kunnen goede beleidsmaatregelen zijn om de transitie naar moederschap te vergroten. Een makkelijke terugkeer heeft ook de voorkeur gezien de resultaten van hoofdstuk 4, waar duidelijk wordt dat het verlies van de werkrol een negatieve invloed heeft op het welbevinden van jonge moeders. Ook zou beleid zich kunnen richten op het verkleinen van sociaaleconomische verschillen tussen kinderlozen en ouders. Waar onderzoek heeft aangetoond dat kinderloosheid gepaard gaat met gunstige sociaaleconomische posities voor vrouwen, laat dit proefschrift een omgekeerd patroon zien voor mannen. Beleidsaandacht voor deze verschillen is wenselijk.

*Aanbevelingen voor toekomstig onderzoek.* Naar aanleiding van deze studie kan er een aantal aanbevelingen voor toekomstig onderzoek worden geformuleerd. Allereerst zijn er longitudinale data nodig om verder inzicht te geven in de levenspaden naar en de implicaties van kinderloosheid. Dit zou het mogelijk maken om hardere uitspraken te doen over causaliteit dan met cross-sectionele data mogelijk is. Een tweede aanbeveling voor toekomstig onderzoek is het onderscheiden van biologische en sociale oorzaken van kinderloosheid. Op basis van de resultaten uit dit proefschrift kunnen geen conclusies worden getrokken over de mate waarin kinderloosheid het resultaat is van onvruchtbaarheid. Ten derde zou toekomstig onderzoek zich naast de implicaties van biologisch ouderschap ook moeten richten op de gevolgen van het hebben van adoptiekinderen en stiefkinderen. Vanwege de lage aantallen stiefkinderen en geadopteerde kinderen in mijn data, konden verschillen met kinderlozen alleen worden

geanalyseerd voor ouders met biologische kinderen. Een vierde aanbeveling voor onderzoek is het hanteren van een perspectief op paren bij de bestudering van de levenspaden naar en de levensuitkomsten van kinderloosheid. In de meeste gevallen is de transitie naar ouderschap een transitie die wordt gemaakt door paren. En waar er twee mensen aanwezig zijn, kunnen er ook twee mensen verschillen in de wens om kinderen te krijgen en in hoe zij het hebben van kinderen ervaren. Dit onderzoek naar kinderloosheid heeft zich enkel gericht op individuen. Het toonde aan dat de gevolgen van kinderloosheid verschillend worden ervaren door mannen en vrouwen. Het kan zijn dat binnen relaties minder verschillen tussen mannen en vrouwen worden gevonden, maar dergelijk onderzoek is schaars. Het is interessant om te weten hoe mannen en vrouwen binnen eenzelfde relatie de gevolgen van kinderloosheid ervaren. Een vijfde aanbeveling betreft de toevoeging van een macroperspectief. Dit proefschrift heeft kinderloosheid in Nederland bestudeerd en heeft laten zien dat verschillen tussen individuen van grote invloed zijn op hoe kinderloosheid wordt ervaren. Natuurlijk kan beleid de mogelijkheden die mensen hebben om kinderen in te passen in hun leven en de invloed die kinderloosheid heeft op het leven van mensen beïnvloeden. Omdat zulk beleid verschilt tussen landen, zou toekomstig onderzoek naar kinderloosheid baat hebben bij het hanteren van een landenvergelijkend perspectief.

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## **Curriculum Vitae**

Renske Keizer was born in Odoorn, the Netherlands on July 10, 1983. She received her gymnasium diploma at the Stedelijk Lyceum Scholengemeenschap Zuid (magna cum laude) in 2001. She studied at Utrecht University of which she obtained her Master's degrees with distinction (cum laude) in 2005. During her studies, she worked as a student assistant at the Department of General Social Sciences, Utrecht University. From July 2005 onwards she was a PhD student at the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) in The Hague and was affiliated with the Interuniversity Center for Social Science Research and Methodology (ICS) of the Sociology department of Utrecht University. As of February 2010, she is employed as a post-doc at the Sociology Department, Erasmus University, Rotterdam.



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