

Goal-Setting, Sense of Self, and Sense of Womanhood in Undergraduate Women with Fertility Issues

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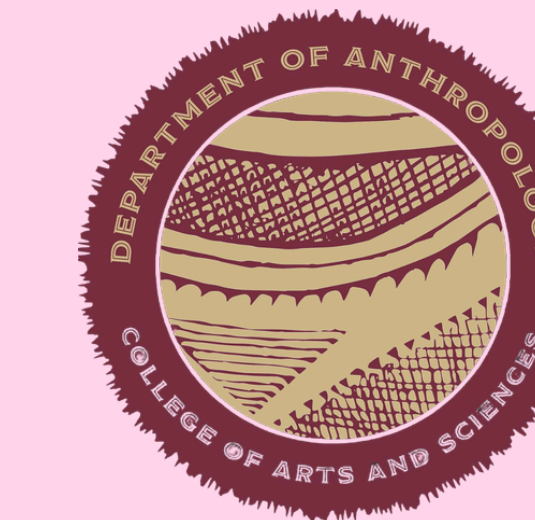


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SOCIAL HEALTH AND IMMUNOLOGY RESEARCH LAB

Introduction

Infertility is defined by the World Health Organization as the inability to conceive a child after a 12-month period of actively trying; however, it has colloquially become used to simply describe one who is unable to conceive children (completely infertile) or will have difficulty doing so (partially infertile), regardless of whether one is trying to conceive or not. In 2021, it was reported that one in six people live with infertility worldwide (World Health Organization, 2024), made up of 1.8% of the global male population and 3.7% of the global female population. In data collected in 2022, it was found that 13.4% of women in the United States have impaired fecundity, meaning ability to conceive and/or carry a pregnancy.

Despite the large population of people facing infertility, research on the psychological effects of this condition could be considered very limited. This is because the majority of this research only focuses on people who are actively trying to conceive a child or have already conceived. This may be because these populations of people are the most concerned/affected by infertility, but this research focus overlooks populations of different age ranges, marital statuses, and interests in having children. While one may not be actively in a place where they are trying to have children or have even decided if it interests them, it is still possible for this information to have an effect on them. Additionally, it is also worth exploring the effect that infertility can have on people who are uninterested in having children.

There are many ways in which one can become aware of their "fertility status" prior to attempting conceive. Many chronic diseases lead to a decreased chance of getting pregnant. For example, one third of people who have endometriosis (Zondervan et al., 2020) and 40% who have PCOS experience infertility (Teede et al., 2010).

Undergraduate women may become aware of their fertility status through a variety of different ways, but the affects of this knowledge on them has not been studied. College is a critical time in a person's life to develop goals and a sense of self, and the knowledge that one may face fertility problems has the ability to affect these areas, even if one is not interested in having children.

The effects that awareness of fertility status can have on an undergraduate women's goal setting, sense of self, and sense of womanhood was examined through this research project. It was predicted that the biggest effects of fertility knowledge on these areas would be in women who are interested in having children.

Methods

Participants (n = 20) were recruited to take part in a semi-structured interview. Participants were recruited through a self-identifying interest form. Every participant was compensated with a \$10 Target giftcard. Interviews were subsequently transcribed and coded for data analysis.

Results

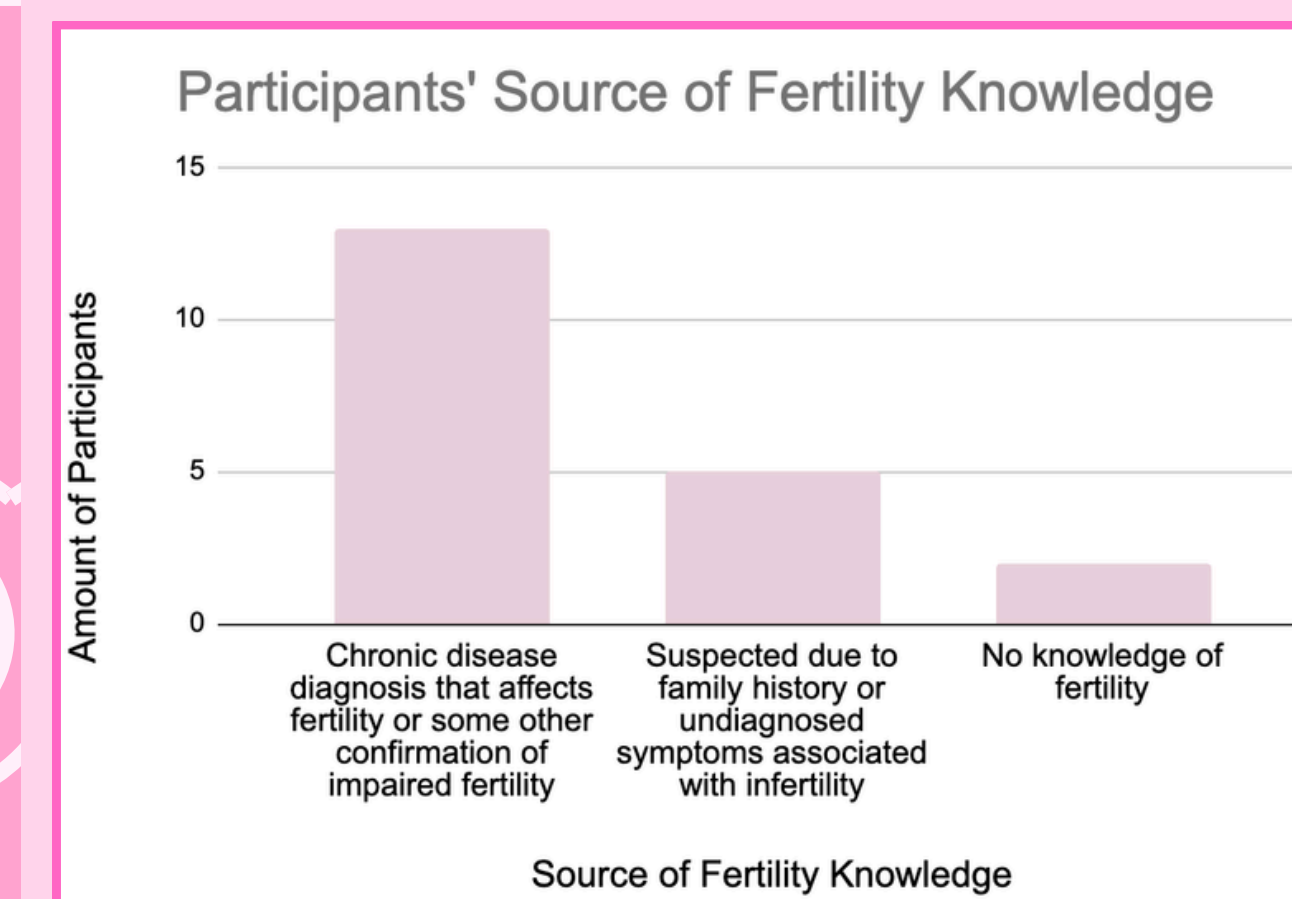


Fig 1. Participants' Source of Fertility Knowledge

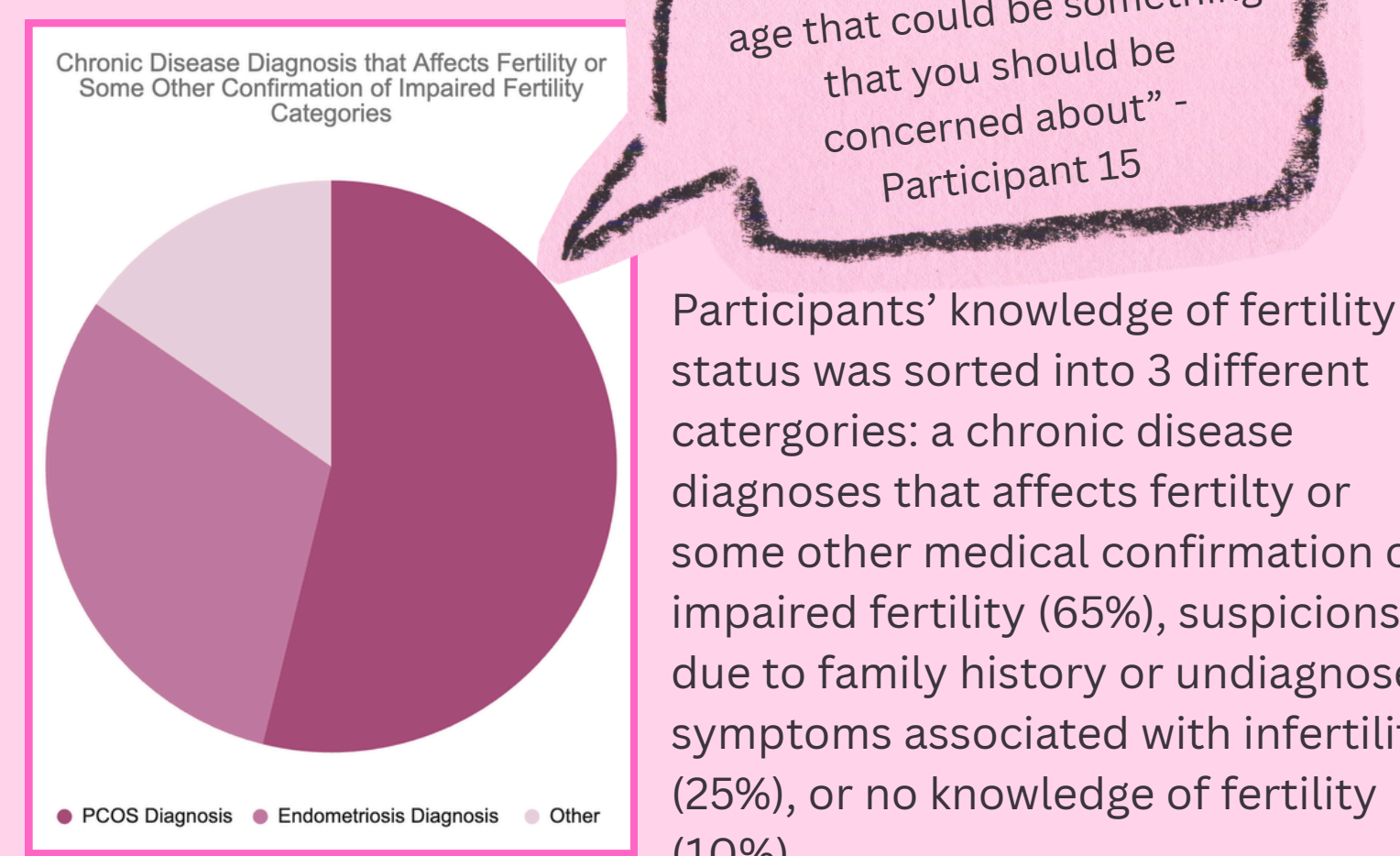


Fig 2. Distribution of Chronic Diseases

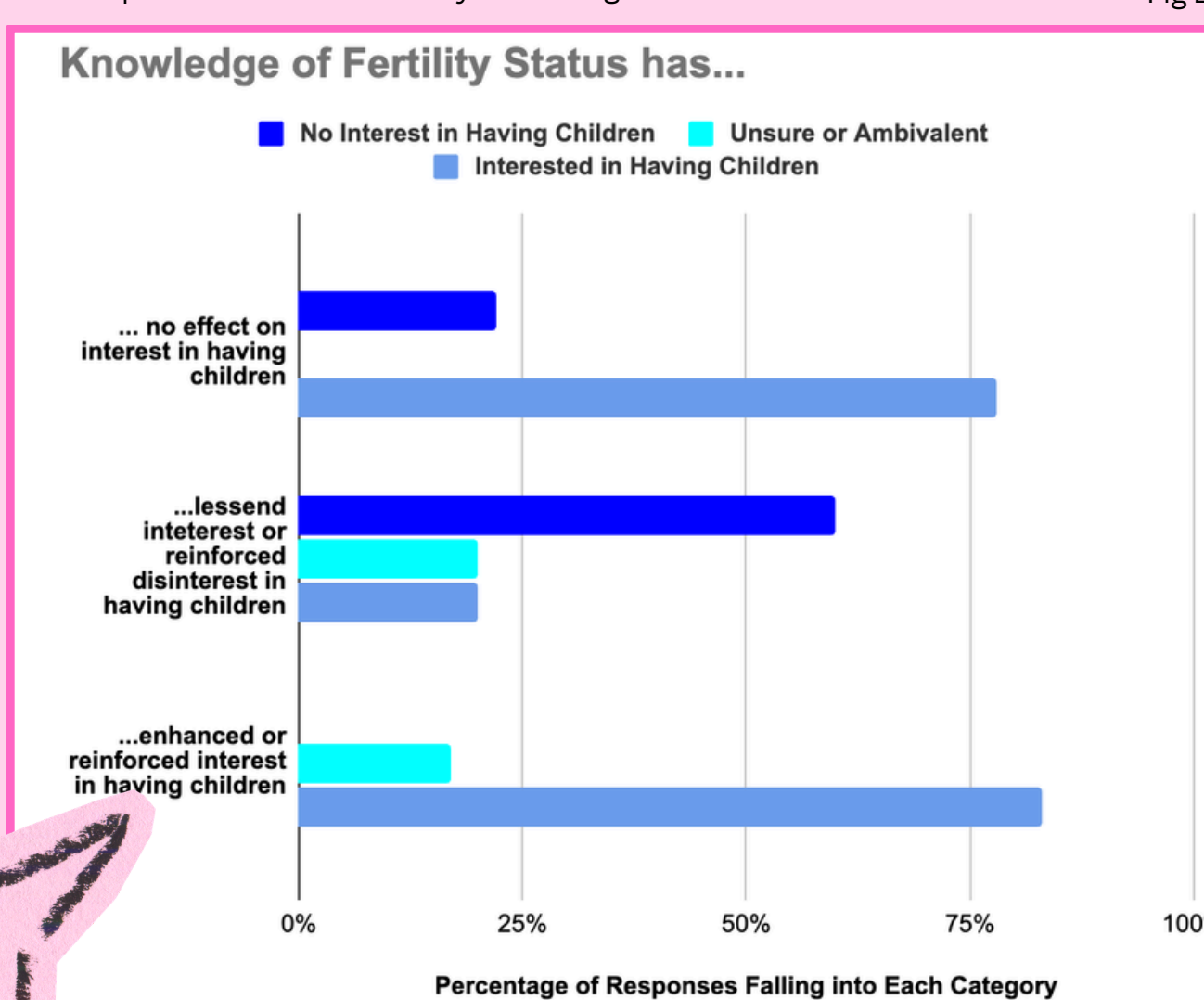


Fig 3. Effects of Fertility Status on Desire to Have Children

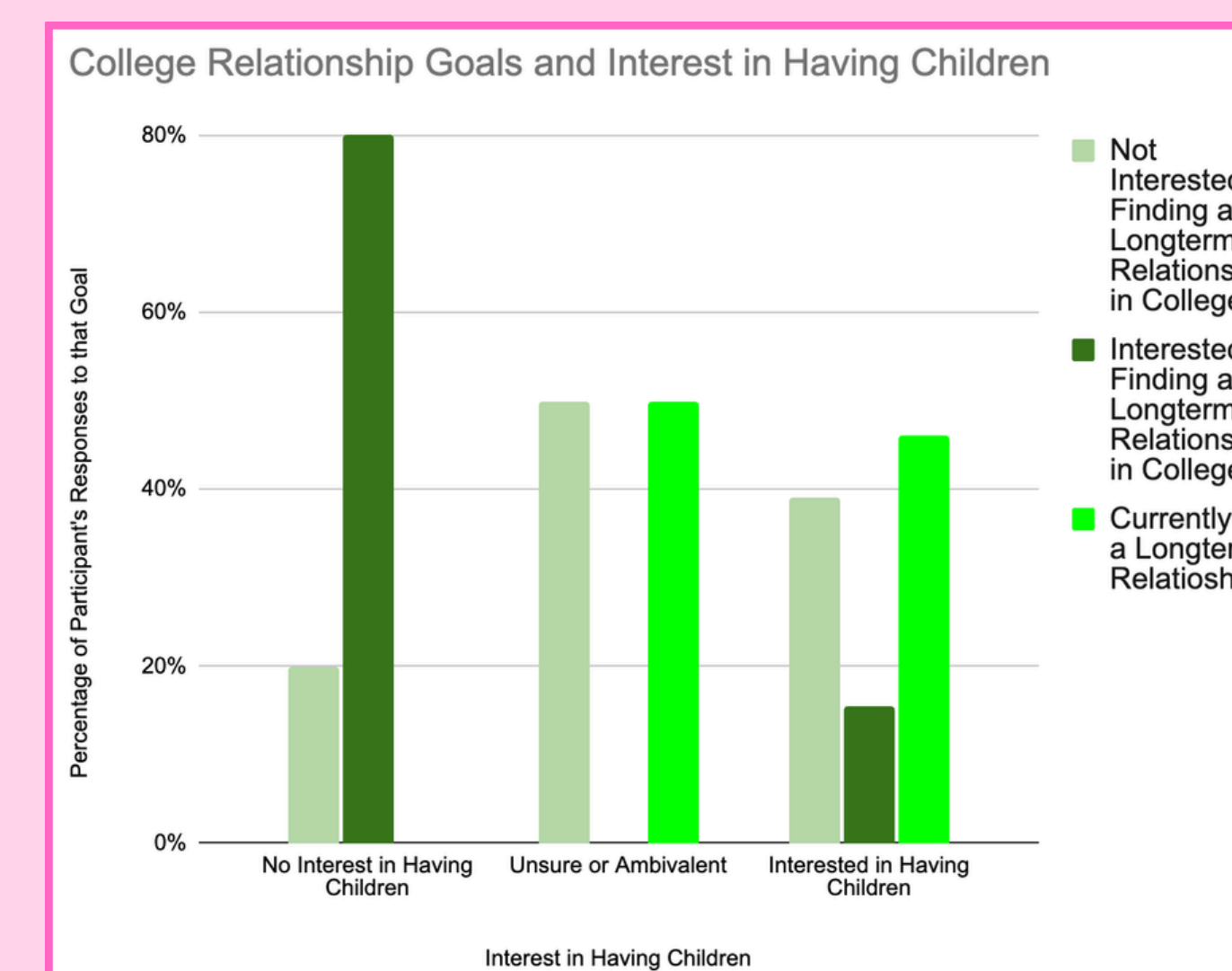


Fig 4. Effects of Fertility Status on College Relationship Goals

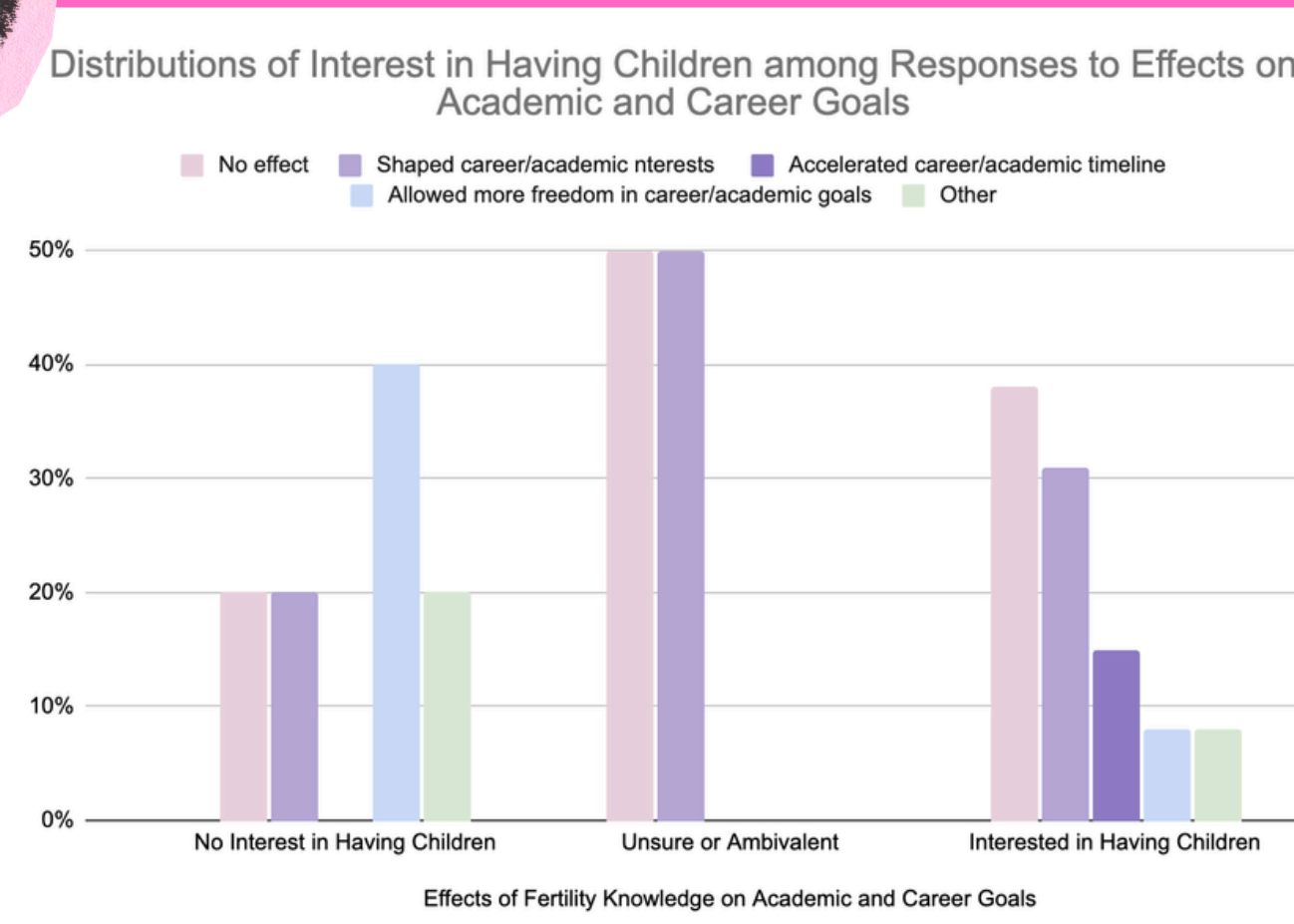


Fig 5. Effects of Fertility Status on Academic/Career Goals

Table 1: Distributions of Effects of Fertility Knowledge on Sense of Womanhood among Interest in Having Children

	No effect	Positive effect	Negative effect	Previous negative effect, but now no effect	Redefined what they think womanhood is
No Interest in Having Children	40%	0%	0%	20%	40%
Unsure or Ambivalent	50%	50%	0%	0%	0%
Interested in Having Children	47%	15%	15%	15%	8%

Sense of Self and Fertility Knowledge

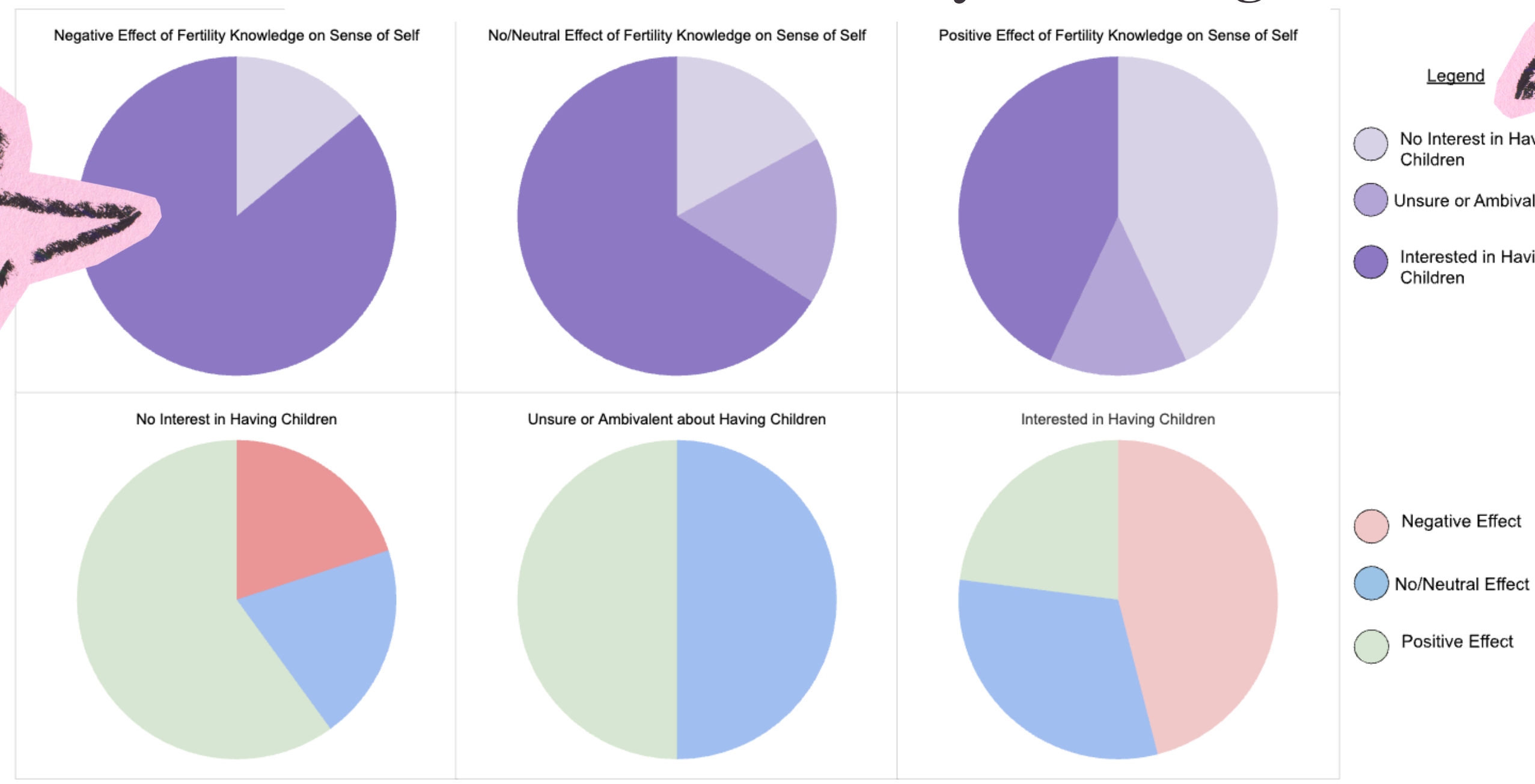


Fig 6. Distributions of Responses Related to Effects of Fertility Knowledge on Sense of Self

Other Take-Aways From Results

- Many participants reported that they had to fight to get a diagnosis for their chronic pains that led to their fertility knowledge. Some of these participants report that that experience has led to an improved sense of self because it taught them to advocate for themselves.
 - Additionally, many participants reported that birth control was pushed onto them as a "band-aid" solution for their problems, instead of actually addressing their issues and despite of the negative effects they experienced with contraception.

Discussion

- A higher percentage of women who are interested in having children said that their knowledge of their fertility status has had a negative effect on their senses of self than women who are uninterested in or unsure about having children.
 - An interesting finding in this project was the large amount of women who reported that the awareness that they might face infertility has actually had a positive effect on their senses of self and sense of womanhood
- A higher percentage of women who are interested in having children say that the knowledge that they may face fertility problems in the future has had no effect than people who are uninterested in having children
- A lot of what contributes to the above two points is that there is a sense of freedom that has arisen for women who are uninterested in having children, when their body is essentially aligning with what they want for themselves. Additionally, there is a degree to which these women are able to escape the stigmas associated with the choice of being childfree.
- The idea that knowledge of fertility issues has reaffirmed desire to have children and sense of self in people who are interested in having children may serve to amplify the amount of time that these women spend thinking about their family plans. Many of these women credit their experiences with their health with teaching them to advocate for themselves and persevere through hardships

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"I think because I've learned this about myself and I've worked through it, I know that I can, you know, witness other hardships and know that I can adapt to them and, you know, change my life for the better" - Participant 15

"It has definitely affected it... My future was kind of like crushed in a way, but only for a little bit until I found community. I found other women who had experienced the same thing, or are experiencing the same thing, and that definitely brought my sense of self back" - Participant 20

"If anything, it made me more grounded in my value outside of a vessel for another human being" - Participant 12

References



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