Futures studies and uncertainty in public policy: A case study on the ageing population in the Netherlands

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Abstract

Policy issues such as sustainability, healthcare and the financial crisis emphasise the importance of anticipating the long-term perspective. In practice, however, it is difficult to deal with such an irregular or deviant topic as the long term in public policy and politics. A perspective on how the long term and its inherent uncertainty play a role in politics and public policy-making processes is under-represented. This article examines how policy-making processes and politics deal with the uncertainty of a long-term issue from the perspective of futures studies. The case study under consideration is the ageing population in the Netherlands, which has been on the country’s political agenda since the end of the nineties. It is shown that the over-reliance on forecasting studies has impacted how uncertainty about the future is dealt with in both policy-making processes and politics. With these conclusions, this paper integrates the existing, yet fragmented, literature on using futures studies in public policy and politics and adds to the scarce empirical research.

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1. Introduction

This article aims to provide insight into how the future and its inherent uncertainty are handled in public policy-making processes and politics from the perspective of futures studies. Futures studies refer to the systematic study of what the future might hold [1] or what we want the future to hold. Depending on the type of futures study, i.e., backcasting, foresight or normative futures studies, a certain (desired) future or several futures may be described. By analysing which futures studies are used in public policy making and politics and how these futures studies deal with uncertainty, it will become clear how policy making and politics deal with uncertainty about the long term. Within this perspective, the research question is: how are futures studies used in policy-making processes and politics?

Clearly defined knowledge is lacking on the long-term aspect in public policy and politics and its inherent uncertainty [1]. Authors from various disciplines have sought to shed light on futures studies, including scholars from sociology [2,3], psychology [4,5], and economics [6,7]. However, only a few researchers have investigated how futures studies influence public policy-making processes or the political debate [8–11]. To complicate matters, empirical research in these studies is scarce and conclusions are not firmly established whether futures studies are used in policy-making processes and politics. Some scholars are sceptical about the use of futures studies in analysis [8,9,11,12]. Using futures studies, they posit, is limited

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to legitimising public policy decisions. In other words, futures studies is used instrumentally and, as such, is not used as a tool to influence politics. Yet, others argue that policy makers use futures studies in the political debate or public policy-making process [13,14]. They claim to have found evidence that futures studies do influence the political agenda, for example, at the beginning or at the end of a new government [1,15]. Also, Dammers [8] and Rijksen-Kloppen [16] point out that the use of futures studies is mainly linked to timing: futures studies are used in government when a strategic decision has to be made.

In answering the above research question, this study builds upon the existing scientific insights and adds to the empirical research in literature by providing an in-depth case study on the ageing population in the Netherlands. An ageing population (from now called ‘ageing’) specifically refers to changes in the ratio between older and younger people. Many nations are now coping with demographic and fiscal projects relating to the ageing of the population. In the Netherlands, several futures studies brought the concept of ageing to public policy and politics during the seventies and eighties and the discussion has continued to flourish.

Before outlining the empirical part of this paper in Sections 3–5, relevant and useful insights from the literature are first elaborated and combined, in order to refine the research question. These insights will guide the analysis throughout the rest of the paper. After outlining the existing literature, the case study is examined and conclusions are drawn.

1.1. Methodology

To answer the research question, a different approach than one commonly used in empirical research in futures studies is required. Research on the use of futures studies usually examines how one specific futures study finds its way into public policy-making or the political debate and aims to generalise the conclusions towards how futures studies are used more broadly. In this article, the perspective of the policy-making process and politics is taken, reviewing the influence of several futures studies.

Furthermore, the article draws on a longitudinal reconstruction and analysis of the policy-making processes and politics concerning the ageing population in the Netherlands to gain insight into how futures studies find their way into these processes. As such, the time span concerning 'long term' that is taken into account has to be determined. Often, authors do not quantify the long term [17–20]. When quantification is applied, there often is a large variety, from 25 [21] to over one hundred years [22]. In this longitudinal case study, the long term is defined as a vision for 20–50 years ahead. This timeframe is defined by the case study: from the start of the case study in the seventies to the aged population around 2020.

The research has a national focus and leads to general conclusions about how uncertainty about the future is dealt with in both politics and public policy-making processes and to specific conclusions on uncertainty. Although conclusions apply to the Dutch case and cannot be readily generalised to other national contexts, interesting further research would be to apply the conceptual framework to different countries and contexts.

The findings presented in this paper result from an analysis informed by three types of data, to ensure methodological triangulation. First, a comprehensive document analysis based on several futures studies was done. Second, authoritative scholarly reconstructions of the use of futures studies in general [1,8,12] were used, as well as one specifically on the Dutch ageing population [9]. Third, in 2009 seven semi-structured interviews were conducted with key-actors in the policy process and political debate on ageing. The respondents, all male, included three high ranking officials from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Employment, the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports and Ministry of Finance; three senior experts two of whom were working for the Netherlands Interdisciplinary Demographic Institute (NIDI) and one a high ranking official at the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis – and a Christian-Democrat politician with an extensive track record on ageing.

Finally, three key-players, high ranking officials from respectively the Ministry of Finance, the Council for Public Health and Health Care and the Ministry of Health, Welfare and Sports have read the documentation to fill gaps and rectify errors.

2. Uncertainty in futures studies

This section deals with the literature on three aspects: (2.1) futures studies and uncertainty, (2.2) uncertainty in policy-making processes and politics and (2.3) stages of public policy-making and politics. These aspects have been chosen to provide insight into how policy processes and politics deal with uncertainty about the future from the perspective of futures studies.

2.1. Futures studies and uncertainty

To begin, the different categories of futures studies and how they handle uncertainty are outlined. While different labels are used to categorise futures studies [23,24], the categorization of van Asselt et al. [1] is used in this study. This labelling is precise and explicitly links the different approaches of futures studies to the uncertainty that is taken into account.

van Asselt et al. [1] define three categories of futures studies: forecasting, foresight and normative futures studies. While each of these categories deals differently with uncertainty, in each category two types of uncertainty regarding the long term are distinguished: cognitive uncertainty and normative uncertainty. The former refers to our lack of knowledge about the phenomena (i.e., epistemic or knowledge uncertainty), due to the inherent variability in the phenomena (i.e., uncertainty inherent in their nature, sometimes also called ontic uncertainty). The essence of cognitive uncertainty is that phenomena
might significantly differ in the future, and it is therefore extremely difficult, if not impossible, to present one image of the future. This type of uncertainty is often addressed by presenting bandwidths, which is a reduced form of cognitive uncertainty. Bandwidths, however, strongly limits cognitive uncertainty, creating a false sense of certainty because the numbers suggest more knowledge on the topic than what actually exists [25]. The second type of uncertainty, normative uncertainty, refers to the plurality of frames that are present among the various actors involved in the decision-making problem (i.e., ambiguity) [1,26]. Finally, each category of futures studies either denies or acknowledges the two types of uncertainty.

The first of Asselt’s categories for futures studies, forecasting, presents one image of the future as relatively certain: the future can be seen as the logical result of the past. For this approach, past-based scientific knowledge and models based on these assumptions are considered a reliable basis for making statements about the future. Forecasting extends past and present patterns and trends into the future, implying a smooth transition between the past, present and the future [27]. In other words, forecasting explores a ‘surprise-free future’ [1]. As such, epistemic uncertainty is mainly limited to identifying bandwidths, and normative uncertainty is mainly ignored; the possibility of different normative frames is not addressed.

A category of futures studies that more strongly emphasises cognitive uncertainty is foresight: dealing with multiple possible and plausible futures. Foresight is often presented in a scenario study as a rich and detailed portrait of a plausible future world, or as future states of a system [28]. A scenario is not a forecast but a plausible description of what might occur [29]. In foresight studies, future images are never given as single scenarios, but they always come with two or more scenarios [30,31]. Because multiple, alternative futures are possible in foresight analysis, it is uncertain which trends develop, continue or stop, and which unexpected events might happen. Note that normative uncertainty is mostly not considered. The different future images are based upon cognitive uncertainty, on uncertainty in our knowledge about certain issues. In foresight, the different normative perspectives are not the basis for developing alternative futures, and the existence of such alternative frames is mainly ignored.

Following van Asselt et al. [1], the third category of futures studies is normative futures studies. In contrast to the first two approaches, forecasting and foresight, normative futures studies favour normativeness instead of trying to be ‘neutral’. The normative strand encompasses two kinds of futures studies: backcasting and critical futures studies. Backcasting aims to develop a single image of a desirable future (utopia) and, from there, to reason backward in time in order to explore how this desirable future may be achieved. In contrast, critical futures studies concentrate on normative uncertainty. ‘Critical futures studies emphasise that images of possible futures are not neutral but represent particular desires, values, cultural assumptions and world views.’ [1]. Such futures studies sketch a future that is considered ideal, for example, a situation of peace and tolerance, or a situation where the environmental burden is minimised. These types of futures studies do not attempt to imagine one or more possible images of the future or one or more possible images of development without a statement being made about the desirability of it. Critical futures studies, however, are rarely seen in the Dutch public policy and political context [1]. One example is the futures study on sustainability (2004) of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment, which explicitly outlines different perspectives on sustainability [32].

2.2. Uncertainty in public policy-making processes and politics

Having outlined the different categories of futures studies and how they handle uncertainty, I would like to address the question of how politicians and public policy makers deal with uncertainty. It is often stated that policy makers hold onto the known and familiar [27] and that they search for certainty and avoid acknowledging uncertainty of the long term. In this light, van Asselt et al. [33] argue that in most Western societies, ‘familiarity and certainty seem a reflex’ and they warn about certainification. Certainification [33] means that figures or future speculations are interpreted as facts by public policy makers and politicians while ignoring that futures studies deal with assumptions and uncertainties. In certainification, numbers and speculations are presented as ‘the truth’ [34]. Furthermore, Enserink et al. [26] convincingly show that the users of futures studies ‘pick’ one scenario to work with, instead of using all of them. According to some authors [1,9,33,34], forecasting is expected to be dominantly used in politics and public policy-making processes. In other words, it is expected that politicians and policy makers overuse and over-rely on forecasts. Because forecasting reduces the two types of uncertainty of the future, it presents one view of the future, and for this reason, it is most suitable for certainification. In contrast, foresight and normative futures studies are less suited for certainification because they present alternative multiple possible and plausible futures, which complicates seeing or using the studies as clear facts. Because it does not distinguish between cognitive and normative uncertainty, the concept of certainification does not leave any leeway for nuance. This is a problem when dealing with situations influenced by multiple factors such as public policy making and politics. Hence, taking into account certainification but at the same time looking for more depth in this discussion, the research question can be refined to: while over relying on forecasting, how do public policy-making processes and politics deal with normative and cognitive uncertainty?

2.3. Stages of public policy making and politics

The last step that is taken in this literature review concerns public policy-making processes and politics. To my knowledge, research on uncertainty regarding the long term or the future has not made a distinction between policy-making processes and politics [10,11,13,35]. In both processes, it is argued, it is difficult to deal with uncertainty and the unknown
concerning the long term. To structure the case study analysis, I will use three widely accepted concepts: the policy agenda, the political agenda and the decision agenda [36], together covering the process of public policy-making and politics. The case study examines how uncertainty is handled by the three different agendas. These classic concepts have proven to be useful to structure policy processes and politics, because they distinguish different phases, characteristics and processes of policy-making processes and politics. By using these concepts, typical characteristics within the development of an irregular or deviant topic such as uncertainty about the future might come to the fore. First, the political agenda refers to the actual politics that is taking place. In the words of Kingdon [36], the political agenda means The president and his closest advisers, for instance, have as their agenda the ‘biggest’ items, things like international crises, major legislative initiatives, the state of the economy, and major budgetary decisions. The political agenda is the place where the political debate occurs, for example, the first and second chamber in the Netherlands or the House of Representatives and the Senate in the US. Second, the public policy agenda deals with solutions to problems: certain policy options and alternatives are specific for certain policy items. In the public policy agenda, civil servants play the crucial role. In Kingdon’s words [36] the ‘more specialised agendas, including agendas for health officers or transportation officials’. Finally, the decision agenda is exclusively the realm of the cabinet, the ministers in charge. This is where the actual decisions are taken.

After this literature review on public policy-making processes and politics in futures studies, the research question is refined to: while over-relying on forecasting, how is normative and cognitive uncertainty dealt with in the three different agendas?

3. The ageing case study: the policy agenda

As early as the seventies, ageing appeared as a possible future problem in statistical forecasting studies in the Netherlands. The Netherlands Institute for Social Research examined patterns and trends in the Dutch population [37]. The Statistics Netherlands, which publishes population projections every four years using quantitative forecasting models, also gave insights into how demographic trends were developing in the Netherlands [38]. As Fig. 1 shows, these studies showed one future image: a decreasing and ageing population, based upon trends in the death rate, birth rate, and statistics about marriage and migration.

The cognitive uncertainty of these studies was presented only in bandwidths. For example, it was stated that ‘the population will age until the year 2000. The percentage of population aged under 20 will decrease from 28 to 21–24%, while at the same time, population aged 65 and over will increase with 12 to 14–15%. (p. 38)’ [38]. From a perspective of normative uncertainty, the studies did not discuss underlying assumptions. They assumed, in extrapolating trends, that underlying norms and values, such as the number of children per woman and the number of marriages, would not significantly change.

Fig. 1. Forecasting of population by age group at January 1st to 2030, low and high variant, according to the Statistics Netherlands in 1984 [39].
For example, it was stated that ‘*the average number of children that would be born per woman would decrease from 2 to 1.3–1.7%, the average number of childless women would increase from 12 to 22.5–37.5%*’ [38]. As such, normative uncertainty was mistreated, leaving room for misinterpretation and ineffective use [39].

In May 1985, Goudriaan’s work and the CBS report led to parliamentary concern, which, in turn, led to the establishment of an external advisory committee on ageing, the Drees Committee. In 1987, the committee produced the report *Mirrored in Time* [40], which was a forecasting study that detailed the implications that ageing was going to have on the financing of state pensions. The report contained a trend analysis of the ageing population, the retirement developments and the labour market [40,41] and sketched one image of the future with only bandwidths as cognitive uncertainty. Table 1 illustrates this: the costs of the pensions income will range from 14.6% of the GDP in ‘middle forecast’, to 14.6% in ‘high forecast’ in 2010 and in 2030, this is subsequently 24.2–22.7%.

Like Goudriaan’s work and the CBS report, this sketch assumed no changes in norms and values, and it failed to address the particular assumptions, pretending to be objective while ignoring normative uncertainty. Although *Mirrored in Time* was considered to be a serious and qualified report that politicians wanted, the report did not create any substantial interest in the issue of ageing. The report does not stir much in The Hague Binnenhof: there has been no debate in parliament and it has not devoted or led to feverish activity of the legislator’ [42]. Several respondents indicated that the issue was still on the horizon. ‘Ageing: that’s something to have a look at over ten years’. Other political issues, such as the unemployment between 1986 and 1987, were felt to be much more urgent and more deserving of political attention.

The abovementioned futures studies emphasised that an ageing population would influence various public policy areas. For example, it would impact the growth of the labour market both at the time and in the future, and it would influence pensions. The future situation of the labour market was addressed in several forecasting futures studies. For instance, the Scientific Council for Government Policy published a forecasting report on labour participation [43] (Fig. 2).

The basis of this advice was a quantitative calculation, this way limiting cognitive uncertainty by pretending to know the future. For example, it was argued that ‘*labour market participation of women would increase with 473.000, referring to 1990 levels*’ [43]. The assumptions on which these trends were based were not discussed in the publications of the Scientific Council of Government Policy. For example, it was only noted [43] that ‘*a different policy, different economic circumstances, as well as a changing social and cultural situation (…) would lead to different outcomes than expected with this forecasting*’. The Social-Economic Council also published a forecasting trend analysis on the medium term of economic and financial planning in 1990 and 1994 [44,45]. The 1994 study was a trend analysis with bandwidths extrapolating then current trends on employment and fiscal policy with regard to ageing. Table 2 illustrates this point: The forecast expects a growth of the GDP in the ‘cautious forecast’ with 1.3/4%, while the ‘favourable forecast’ expects a growth of 3%. The world trade would grow with 4% and in the former forecast and in the latter with 6.5%.

Finally, the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis published several forecasting studies bearing the same message [46–50]. As the studies presented above, these futures studies all sketched one future, extrapolated from trends in
economic growth and labour market participation, and, based on that particular future, emphasised that the main future challenges of the economy were in “...the ageing of the potential workforce, which with current policies by the increase of the workforce with future pension claims inactivity may boost it even further” [47]. The focus on ‘main challenges’ and ‘current policies’ reveals that the study of the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis did not account for normativity; it was expected that normative circumstances would not change. In this way, the study pretended to be objective and, in doing so, neglected normative uncertainty. Ignoring (normative) uncertainty restrains the responsibility that producers of futures studies have, especially those in public interests [51]. Changes in normative frames and values will have consequences for the future.

These future studies formulated different types of policy options, such as the unemployment insurance law and the statutory disability payment, which were implemented later on [9].

The second public policy area that was influenced by the advice of studies of the futures was pension policy. During the nineties, several futures studies on ageing were published that impacted pension policies [48,49,52]. Respondents mentioned that these different futures studies put new policy options on the agenda, such as the replacement of early retirement (collectively paid for) by pre-retirement (at your own expense), which were implemented during the nineties [9]. Several futures studies also warned that it would be increasingly difficult to overcome financial setbacks related to pensions.

The futures studies were again mainly forecasting studies. For example, the study of the Scientific Council of Government Policy in 1993 [52] was a trend analysis concerning public policy areas that were sensitive to ageing, such as the labour force, pension schemes, healthcare and demographic policy. The quantitative trends in the study presented one image of the future until 2050, which limited cognitive uncertainty. As Fig. 3 shows, the report presented two trends for persons with pension schemes, a lower (WRR-J) and a upper (WRR-O) trend. The future is expected to stay within this range: ‘the ratio will worsen in the decennia to come: in 1990 with 0.47% and it will vary between 0.76% (WRR-J) and 0.98% (WRR-O) in 2035.” [52].

Among these various studies, one foresight study conducted in 1992 by the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis introduced four different scenarios with variations in population: from a growing population to a shrinking population. However, in all four scenarios, it was argued that future pension payment rates would be difficult to guarantee. For example [46], it is stated that in the scenario of European Renaissance, “the reform is a modest and selective sobering of financial entitlements, including a scaling back of paternalistic subsidies”. In the Balanced Growth scenario, ‘(...) paternalistic subsidies are abolished’. These specific conclusions are not backed-up by figures or calculations. As such, the study claimed to address and present alternative futures, but in actuality it still limited the cognitive uncertainty: in all futures, it would be difficult to ensure pensions. In addition, the study ignored normative uncertainty. For example, when looking at trends in non-renewable resources it [46] stated that ‘despite various uncertainties we believe that the cumulative consumption of resources in the period up to 2015 does not in itself damage the possibilities for economic development of future generations’. This assumption is not discussed or further outlined.

These two examples show that there has been little discussion in public policy making and politics on uncertainty about the future of the ageing society, regarding either cognitive or normative uncertainty. This lack of discussion about these types of uncertainty can be explained by three elements. First, the discussion was stimulated by the dominance of forecasting studies. These studies limited the cognitive uncertainty and ignored the normative uncertainty. Since public policy makers

![Fig. 3. Expected total amount of people with pension schemes by working population to 2040, according to the WRR in 1993 [52].](image-url)
4. The ageing case study: the political agenda

Although ageing was on different public policy agendas in the nineties, it was not until the millennium change that ageing appeared on the political agenda as well. By 1998, the new Dutch administration had largely completed the urgent issues such as the control of public expenditure and the introduction of the euro. In the nineties, the euro was the measuring stick for budgetary policy, the Netherlands and in the other countries in the Eurozone. Once the euro was introduced, countries needed a new financial measure for fiscal policy. This measure became ageing and its possible consequences.

In the process of using ageing as the new measuring stick for financial policy, futures studies played an important role [9]. Several agencies, such as the Scientific Council for Government Policy [53] and the Dutch Bank [54] published forecasting studies on the urgency of the Dutch finances in the light of the ageing population. Most important was the one from the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis that published a futures study in preparation of the budget policy for the 2001 administration period. It was highly valued by the financial administration and became their central focal point. The study stated that “…as a consequence of the acceleration of the ageing after 2010, when the first baby boomers reach the age of 65, it is urgent to take measures in the coming years” [55]. The study presented three different scenarios until 2050 and calculated the sustainability of public finances within these three scenarios. However, the scenarios differed only slightly. In general, in each scenario the economy and the ageing population grew. In other words, only one image of the future was presented. By sketching one future image, the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis and the State Group Budget Policy pretended to know the important facts about the future. For example, the Study Group Budget Policy [55] stated, based upon this study that ‘subsequently, during 2010–2040, the number of people of 20–64 years will decrease with 3/4 million persons and the number of people age 65 and older with 11/2 million persons’. By doing this, they reduced cognitive uncertainty to bandwiths and ignored normative uncertainty because underlying norms and values were not addressed.

In addition, the issue of using the ageing population as the financial measure was further emphasised by the conservative administration that took office in 2002, consisting of the CDA (Christian Democratic Party), the LPF (Lijst Pim Fortuyn, a right-minded party) and the VVD (Liberal Party). The CDA’s scientific institute in preparing for the new millennium focused a great deal on the ageing issue by extrapolating current trends [56], analysing the financial consequences of the policies at the time on the labour market and pensions in the future. So, ageing and, in particular, its effects were priorities for the CDA.

These ideas were included in the subsequent coalition agreement, as they seemed to garner wide political support.

Moreover, short-term issues on the political agenda and the long-term ageing issue were aligned by emphasising the then current problems in light of the future. In this way, the future ageing issue became more pressing. The link was presented in both a direct and an indirect way. Normally, ‘the future’ is not visible and often even less tangible, but because the first after-war ‘baby boomers’ had retired early from the labour market, the future became directly visible through them and, as such, more urgent. Additionally, futures studies available at the time made people more aware of the possible effects of ageing and thus they indirectly made the future ever more present. In the studies it was assumed that future developments would exacerbate the then current problems and make them much worse in the future. Experts who are working in the field of health care argued that because there would be more elderly in the future, the costs and waiting lists for health care would grow enormously.

The perspective on ageing presented at the time was economically dominant and negative: ageing was personified as possibly being dangerous not simply for state financing but for many issues. Interestingly, a political debate about the effects of ageing (i.e., about the normative aspects of ageing) was absent in these years. That said, some discussion did occur about the cognitive uncertainty in the search for which figures were ‘true’, i.e., how long the ordered list of people waiting to obtain treatments would be approximately, but figures varied slightly in different forecasting studies [9]. Moreover, the normative discussion was not held; the studies assumed that the underlying assumptions would remain the same. Although ageing was on the political agenda, the different political parties did not discuss underlying assumptions about ageing such as what ‘good healthcare’ was or would be.

This absence of discussion changed around 2005. While the coalition had put one dominant image of the future firmly on the agenda, the political opposition started to project a different view. The opposition claimed that the economic urgency for interventions because of the ageing problem was exaggerated: “…current and future generations not only benefit from a smaller
public debt, but also profit from quality education, good health care and a secure job’ [9]. Moreover, several futures studies gave a broader, more positive perspective on the ageing of the population [57–61].

By extrapolating different trends, they stressed a normative frame that differed from the dominant view of ageing at that time: the problems with ageing, according to the AOW, were not fixed [9]. Not the trends of economic growth or pension schemes were extrapolated, but the increasing level of education, mobility, number of healthy elderly, etc.

The abovementioned reports were also forecasting studies (Table 3), extending past trends into the future. The forecasting study of the National Institute for Public Health and the Environment [57] emphasised that ‘If trends of the past continue, future elderly will be more frequently ill, but they will suffer less from severe illness’ (underpinning calculations lack). The studies of the Council of Economic Advisors of Parliament [58] also stated that ‘...the current debate on economic policy and ageing is often narrowed to a discussion about the potential costs of public arrangements’. However, while these studies emphasised less the consequences of current policies into the future than earlier futures studies on the subject did, they used trends to extrapolate in this way limiting cognitive uncertainty. Table 3 shows a forecast of education of future population (in %) [57].

These studies also ignored normative uncertainty by not discussing alternative frames and cognitive uncertainty and, as such, presented one image of the future. For example, the statement that [60] ‘the RMO wants to create a society in which elderly can participate on the basis of equality, according to their ability and building on the ideals. This is difficult, as the rights of elderly are increasingly organised across themes, such as ‘solidarity’ and ‘acquired right’ is presented as a fact.

Nevertheless, although an alternative frame was offered, respondents in the political debate mentioned that the normative uncertainty was not discussed. Further, the different futures studies did not stimulate this discussion since they did not point out the normative assumptions behind the different trends and patterns they extrapolated. Instead, the discussion was about which report was ‘right’, focussing especially on the numbers and figures in the reports.

The above examination of uncertainty in the political agenda shows that, once again, mainly forecasting futures studies were used in the political debate. Although an alternative perspective on ageing was presented, normative uncertainty was not discussed, i.e., the underlying assumptions or a discussion about why the selected trends were chosen to extrapolate. Moreover, despite the fact that forecasting studies with different points of view were published, they did not outline that these alternative views were the consequence of a different normative perspective. So, normative uncertainty was ignored rather than highlighted. By arguing about numbers and figures, the discussion that was held was actually about cognitive uncertainty rather than about normative uncertainty.

5. The ageing case study: the decision agenda

Once the ageing issue was on the decision agenda, the alarming vision was rapidly included in the political strategic plan of the new coalition that followed the 2002 election. It is striking that only one perspective on the future was outlined in the Miljoennnota, the Dutch government’s budget memorandum. In the memorandum, ageing was seen solely from an economic point of view: it was an emerging problem because of the economic and financial impact it would have on society. By presenting ageing as dangerous, or at least as very problematic, the prime minister rejected in 2003 all uncertainties regarding the future and the effects of ageing. He opted for one ‘certain’ future that he labelled ‘the truth’. Although he acknowledged that long-term policies have more uncertainties than short-term policies, he also stated that this was not as true for the phenomenon of ageing because renowned institutes had forecasted the importance of ageing so there should be no doubt of how it would develop. That year’s budget [62] stated that ‘...the Netherlands Bureau for Economic Policy Analysis, the Dutch Central Bank and the Scientific Council for Government Policy showed a development of ageing that would lead to a derailment of public finance because of the higher public pension costs and the public expenditure for care and care.’ As such, cognitive uncertainty was actively ruled out, and an ageing population in the near future was posited as inevitable. By ignoring normative uncertainty, it was the only vision of the future. The forecasting studies of the acknowledged Dutch institutes were used to underpin this message.

6. Discussion and conclusion

In this paper, the question has been posed how futures studies are used in public policy-making processes and politics. After outlining two types of uncertainty and the distinction of the public policy agenda, the political agenda and the decision agenda, the question was refined: while over-relying on forecasting, how is normative and cognitive uncertainty dealt with in the three different agendas? This concluding section first outlines how uncertainty is handled in public policy-making processes and the political debate (Section 6.1). Section 6.2 reflects upon the absence of normative futures studies.

Table 3
Forecasting of the level of education of future population (%) age 65 and over, 2000–2020, according to RIVM/SCP in 2004 [57].

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6.1. Futures studies and uncertainty in the Dutch ageing debate

As expected, this study showed that the futures studies that were mostly referred to in the issue of ageing were dominantly forecasting studies in the three different agendas: the policy agenda, the political agenda and the decision agenda. Only one or two were foresight studies while critical future and backcasting did not appear at all.

Such an overuse and over-reliance on forecasts by politics and public policy makers, who also refuse to deal with cognitive and normative uncertainty, is not only the result of certainification, but also feeds it. In other words, the use of forecasting studies narrows the focus of the political and policy debate on ageing in the Netherlands, because first of all, forecasting studies present only one image of the future, creating a false sense of certainty: the one image of the future is presented as 'certain', or at least there is a known ‘range’ in which the future will occur. Second, it should be noted that all different forecasting reports present more or less the same certain future. The various futures studies mirror one and the same future image, which makes it difficult to imagine alternative future perspectives. One image from alternative futures might coagulate and alternative views will not have the opportunity to be considered, which easily leads to certainification of the one image. Finally, because the underlying normative assumptions and cognitive uncertainty were not outlined, there was nothing to discuss or reconsider. Where an explicitly outlining normative uncertainty provides an invitation to discussion ignorance uncertainty leads to a narrowly focused debate, not only about the study, but, more importantly, about the consequences.

However, the conclusion that policy makers and politicians cannot handle uncertainty should not be drawn too quickly. The refined research question asked whether certainification needs to be investigated more closely when looking at normative and cognitive uncertainty, especially when combining it with the different agendas.

Regarding the policy agenda, the case study showed that discussions about uncertainty were mainly absent, although this is specifically the place where cognitive uncertainty should be outlined. Civil servants are required to gather all sorts of policy options and think about their issues including effectiveness, legitimacy, and efficiency. Nevertheless, the case study showed that in the public policy agenda, discussions about uncertainty were mostly lacking; there was no debate or critical reflection on an alternative view of ageing which ignores normative uncertainty. When the first forecasting studies raised the issue of ageing and presented different policy options, the concept of ageing and the policy options such as unemployment insurance law, statutory disability payment and abolishing early retirement were incorporated into policies on the labour market. If any discussion developed, the cognitive discussion remained mired at the level of bandwidths. In addition, no debate or critical reflection took place on an alternative view of ageing, which ignores normative uncertainty. This is remarkable since civil servants should be able to adapt to a new situation since political climates and policy change with each new cabinet. The development of different normative frames could help civil servants to quickly adjust to the needs of the new government.

Also remarkable is how uncertainties are handled in the political agenda. The political agenda is ultimately the place where the normative discussion should be held. Politics is about norms and values not only in the here and now but also in the future. However, in the political agenda, forecasting studies are overused, presenting only one normative perspective on the future. The case study showed that the normative discussion on ageing was absent in the political agenda. This absence was initially caused by the different political parties sharing the same perspective on ageing, but later on, this lack was due to the overuse of forecasting studies. Since 2005, however, the opposition has presented a different normative view on ageing by extrapolating different trends. For example, they argued that future elderly would be better educated and empowered, more mobile and active and are longer in good health. Still, the normative discussion has not yet been held because forecasting studies have been used and these ignore normative uncertainty. As such, it was not explained that the alternative view was due to a different normative perspective. Rather, the opposition instrumentally used the different forecasting studies to stress their point of view, leading to a discussion about numbers and figures instead of norms and values. Since the forecasting studies do outline the cognitive uncertainty in terms of bandwidths, it is easy to shift the discussion from normative uncertainty to cognitive uncertainty. In other words, the focus on cognitive uncertainty and the denial of normative uncertainty in the discussion on the political agenda implies a shift in the discussion's focus: the cognitive discussion was held instead of the normative discussion. The question, however, is whether the political agenda is the place to have the cognitive discussion.

In the discussion on the decisive agenda, it was shown that this agenda does not deal with uncertainty – the decision should be taken, the choices are simple: it is either yes or no. The decisive agenda is about legitimising decisions, not about discussion.

In conclusion, it has been shown that certainification occurs in the different agendas. Both types of uncertainty are repressed. This repression becomes problematic when looking at the characteristics of the different agendas, especially concerning the political agenda. In particular, in the political debate the ‘wrong’ type of uncertainty is discussed: often the cognitive discussion is held while the issue at hand is normative. As such, when examining how uncertainty about the future is dealt with, normative and cognitive uncertainty should be distinguished and the difference analysed.

6.2. Normative futures studies

This point leads to the final issue in this discussion: what is achieved by noting the absence of normative uncertainty, or by integrating normative futures studies into the public policy making process, more general? In the following reasoning
how normative uncertainty can change how we think about the future, I rely on the thoughts of van Asselt et al. [1] and Andersson [51]. The use of normative futures studies might broaden the political discussion on an ageing population, however, in the political debate, uncertainty is largely seen as inconvenient and therefore it is avoided as much as possible and reduced where considered possible or necessary. By 'embracing' normative uncertainty [1], a greater emphasis is put on norms and values. The explicit norms and values might be beneficial to the political debate in three ways. First, alternative futures will be presented by the normative futures studies. These alternative futures will make people more aware of the future they are headed for. In the ageing debate, normative uncertainty was not presented, which gave people the feeling that the Netherlands was heading for a certain future, powerless to stop it. Later on, when ageing turned out to be less of an incredible danger, the public had the feeling that they had been fooled.

Second, normative futures studies will lead to conflicts in the public policy making process and the political debate because they are likely to stimulate social conflict. Different (groups of) actors in society have different perspective on the future. Due to a confrontation of alternative futures, certain groups of actors with different viewpoints might not feel left out after a decision is taken. Conflict and debate about a normative future makes it possible to discuss a common future and might create a basis for a common future. In the ageing debate, social conflict and normative futures studies might help steer the discussion about pension age and labour market. What policy ultimately leads to what type of future, and which instruments are needed for a desired future? Based on social conflict, thirdly, choices can be made about the future. As Andersson [50] puts it 'the fundamental importance of futures studies is precisely about choice, about laying out the options available to a society at a given time, explaining their roots and causes, highlighting their consequences'. Regarding the ageing case, the choice about a certain future would have led to a debate upon certain normative ideas: Until what age, seeing the increase in life quality, can people still work? What can the elderly still do during pensions? And what can society still expect from them? When explicitly discussing such normative questions, normative futures studies might bring alternative futures to the foreground and indicate different consequences, which might give a clearer view of choices concerning the future.

References