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Childlessness in life course perspective: A comparison between Hungary and Switzerland

(Extended abstract)

Childlessness in life course perspective

Although the childlessness rate has been increasing in most European countries this topic has received little attention within the literature related to fertility patterns so far. Based on macro level data analysis it has turned out that there is not a strong relationship between low fertility level and the rate of childlessness and neither between the mean age of a mother at first birth and the rate of childlessness among countries (Ellingsaeter et. al 2013). In order to understand the phenomenon of childlessness in more detail we should analyze micro data instead of focusing on macro data.

Most of the literature applies a sharp distinction between voluntary and involuntary childlessness concepts although some of the research has already pointed out that the decision about having children or remaining childless is an on-going process in one's life course instead of the outcome of a single decision (Mynarska et. al. 2013). Fertility intentions are not stable and may change over time (Heiland et. al., 2008). Even those women and men, who made an early and explicit decision to remain childless, may reconsider their decision in a later phase of their life course (Park, 2005; Szalma – Takács, 2012). The opposite pattern can happen also: those women and men who initially planned to have children might change their minds and abandon the idea of parenthood later in their life course (Carmichael – Whittaker, 2007; Szalma – Takács, 2012). Even biological infertility does not necessarily lead to a childless life-style since the development of biotechnology makes it possible to experience parenthood for those people who had to suffer from childlessness earlier (medical problems, same sex couples and those who haven't found the appropriate partner) by artificial insemination, in-vitro fertilization and surrogate motherhood (Fasouliotis – Schenker, 1999) or childless people can also obtain parenthood status by adoption (Takács – Szalma, 2012).

In this research we use the life course perspective to reveal what kinds of life course developments lead to remaining childlessness (Hagestad – Call, 2007). Previous researchers have found that partnership, educational and employment histories are particularly important in this respect (Tanturri – Mencarini, 2008; Szalma – Takács, 2012; Mynaroska et. al., 2013).

The lack of stable partnership is the main factor in remaining childless (Testa – Toulemnon 2006). Spéder and Kapitány (2012) have also shed light on the importance of partnership formation (marriage or cohabitation). The importance of educational level also matters but its effect is different between men and women: higher educated women are more likely to remain childless while the opposite tendency can be observed among men. Employment status is also important for both genders in the transition to parenthood: those men and women who have stable jobs are more likely to become parents. Based on our preliminary qualitative research we find another important factor which can be regarded as a path to childlessness in Hungary: the instability of the financial situation. Considering the effect of this factor we chose to compare the Hungarian childlessness pattern with the Swiss pattern supposing that they will differ in this respect. The aim of this research is to explore paths to childlessness over the life courses of Hungarian and Swiss women and men. We pay attention to the incidence, timing, sequence and duration of these life events in the course of respondents' lives.

Methodological approach: Sequence analysis

The empirical base of our proposed presentation is given by the Hungarian datasets of the Gender and Generation Survey; its first three waves were carried out between 2001 and 2008. For Switzerland we use the Swiss Household Panel (SHP) which was carried out every year since 1999. We applied sequence analysis and explored biographies of childless women and men aged 30-49 in both countries. This allows us to reconstruct distinct life course trajectories of childless women and men taking into account the sequence and duration of life stages in different life domains (e.g. education, partnership or employment).

Case studies: Hungary and Switzerland

In this paper we aim to explore paths into childlessness over the life courses of Hungarian and Swiss women and men. Hungary and Switzerland have experienced a marked decline in childbearing although Switzerland belongs to the countries where the fertility level is higher than the average, while Hungary has one of the lowest fertility levels in Europe. Nevertheless these childlessness rates differ in opposite directions: Hungary belongs to the countries where the proportion of childless people is low (around 10%) while the childlessness rate is relatively high in Switzerland (around 18%). However the main differences between the two countries can be found in their economic situation. Switzerland is one of the richest countries in Europe with a low unemployment rate and widespread part-time jobs, while the GDP of

Hungary is much lower and the unemployment rate is higher, yet part-time jobs are not widespread at all.

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