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Paths into childlessness: Country-specific or universal?

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Introduction: Childlessness over the life course

Childlessness is rarely an outcome of a single decision or can be attributed to one particular reason. Fertility intentions are not stable and may change over time (Heaton et al. 1999; Heiland et al. 2008). Even women, who made an early and explicit decision to remain childless experience moments of doubts and ambivalence, which might make them reconsider once taken position (Letherby 2002; Park 2005). Similarly, those who initially planned to have offspring, might become accustomed to a childless life-style and abandon an idea of motherhood (Carmichael and Whittaker 2007; Morgan 1991). They might also face numerous obstacles in realizing their fertility intentions. An illness, a loss of a partner or a difficult economic situation are just a few examples here (Gillespie 2003; Heaton et al. 1999; Lee and Gramotnev 2006). Even a biological inability to have children is not necessarily a status that a woman gains once for a life-time. Assisted reproduction techniques may allow some individuals to become parents after they have experienced infertility (Letherby 1999; van den Akker 2001). On the other hand, postponement of childbearing (regardless of its reason) may cause some perfectly healthy and fecund women reach an age, when having offspring is no longer biologically possible for them (te Velde and Pearson 2002).

Altogether, remaining childless is a process. It is a product of continuously changing context, of individual developments and life course pathways, influenced by many choices made by an individual in other life spheres (Campbell 1985; Gillespie 1999). Instead of looking for one single reason of childlessness, we should ask what life course developments

may lead to it (Hagestad and Call 2007; Keizer et al. 2008). Previous research has shown that partnership, educational and employment histories are particularly important in this respect (Heaton et al. 1999; Keizer et al. 2008; Koropeckyj-Cox and Call 2007; Lee and Gramotnev 2006; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008).

Although a necessity to look at childlessness in a dynamic way, to treat it as a process and analyze it from the life course perspective has been already emphasized in the literature, not many studies have adopted the life course approach so far. Moreover, those which employed a retrospective perspective usually relied on measures that cumulate information on individual experiences over the life course (such as time spent in a union or in employment) and looked how they affected a probability to have no children. Nevertheless, such an approach can be seen as simplistic as it does not pay attention to the sequence and spacing of experienced events and hence does not allow to capture a whole variety of different roads leading to childlessness that are postulated in the literature (Carmichael and Whittaker 2007; Hagestad and Call 2007; Keizer et al. 2008; Kemkes-Grottenthaler 2003; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008).

Our objective is to explore paths that lead to childlessness. Similarly to other studies we look at childlessness from life course perspective. Our advantage over the previous research is, however, its methodological approach which allows for revealing the diversity of these paths. Namely, we propose an exploratory approach of sequence analysis to reconstruct distinct life course trajectories of childless women. Unlike previous studies, we do not focus on the effect of accumulated experience of life course events, but we consider sequence and duration of life stages in a sphere of partnership, education and employment of childless women. Such approach allows a holistic perspective on life course, and is based on a representation of lives as sequences of states. In this way we treat life courses as complex entities in their wholeness, instead of specific events or combinations of events, as dependent variables (Billari 2001).

In order to investigate the process of becoming childless more in-depth not only do we look at the diversity of paths into childlessness within a country, but also adopt a cross-national perspective. Such approach allows us to verify whether the process of becoming childless depends on the country context or whether the paths are universal. To this end we selected several countries which experienced a pronounced increase in childlessness and which, at the same time, differ in institutional and cultural settings of fertility choices.

Methodological approach: Sequence analysis

The study of life courses in demographic and sociological research has increasingly employed event history techniques. Often researchers have taken one process as given and studied how the other process relates to it (Mulder and Wagner 2001) or studied the mutual interdependencies between parallel careers (e.g., Matysiak 2009). However, focusing on time-to-event in our research would lead to focus on the transition (or non-transition) to first births only, failing to grasp the holistic view on the life-course and the variety of paths leading to childlessness.

Thus, in order to describe the different paths into childlessness we decided to use sequence analysis with optimal matching algorithm. This method, originally developed for the analysis of protein and DNA sequences in bio-molecular studies, is relatively new in social sciences (Abbott 1995; Baizan et al. 2002; Baranowska 2008; Billari 2001). It was designed to provide a more holistic perspective on life courses, namely to illustrate the complexity of life courses, or at the construction of “ideal-types” of life trajectories. It allows us to reconstruct distinct life course trajectories of childless women, taking into account sequence and duration of life stages in different life domains (e.g., partnership or employment).

We analyze life histories of women, who are childless and have reached the age when having a child is highly unlikely. We consider women’s education, employment and partnership histories and explore how these three life spheres intertwined, shaping different pathways into childlessness.

First results and outlook

For the moment our analyses are ready for two countries: Italy and Poland. Both countries experienced strong increases in childlessness (from 10% among the 1955 cohort to 20% among the 1965 cohort in Italy and from 5% to 15.4% from cohort 1960 to 1965 in Poland) and are currently countries with highest incidences of childlessness in their regions (Southern Europe and Eastern Europe). In both family policies are residual and gender role attitudes are traditional, but the two countries differ in the timing of the start of the change in family-related behaviors. Poland is also a post-socialist country which experienced a rapid economic, social and political transformation after the collapse of the state socialism which seems to have not remained without consequences for family formation (Kotowska and Józwiak 2003).

In order to conduct our study we used data from the Household Multipurpose Survey on Family and Social Subjects (2009) for Italy and the 2011 FAMWELL Survey on

Childlessness for Poland. From these surveys we extracted information on employment, partnership and education histories for 471 childless women in Italy and 449 childless women in Poland. On these data we identified six distinct life course trajectories of Polish women and five for their Italian counterparts. Our study showed that there is a lot of diversity in pathways leading to childlessness. Although childlessness is related to being single and to prolonged education most of all, we found also that there is quite a large group of low educated and non-working childless women or a group of married childless women (for the Polish sample we were able to verify that childlessness of married women cannot be fully attributed to infertility). This diversity calls for much more attention. Instead of collapsing all childless women into one category, our findings clearly illustrate diverse paths leading to childlessness according to various life course developments.

Cluster	Share of childless women in Italy	Share of childless women in Poland
Highly educated, single and working women	19.5%	18.2%
Prolonged education	-	16.2%
Working single and low educated women	42.3%	17.3%
Working married, relatively well educated women	12.5%	17.3%
Non-working, single and low educated women	21.9%	15.8%
Well educated, (mostly) partnered women with uncertain employment careers	-	15.0%
Stay-at-home wives	3.8%	-

Apart from few exceptions we found very similar categories of pathways to childlessness in both analyzed contexts. This finding suggests that at least some paths into childlessness might be universal and independent of the context. On the other hand, however, a closer analysis of the pathways indicated that seemingly identical biographies may have different meanings in different settings, pointing to a complexity of the phenomenon. Extending our analyses to other countries should provide us with more insights into it and allow us to investigate the extent to which life course developments of childless women are universal across countries and to which they are shaped by the country context.

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