

Choosing to remain childless? A comparative study of fertility intentions among women and men in Italy and Britain

Long Abstract

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Introduction and background

Since the 1970s, among other social and demographic transformations, several European countries have experienced an increase in the levels of childlessness. This may partly be a consequence of women progressively delaying procreation to later ages and the corresponding decrease in fecundity, and partly attributable to greater social acceptance of individual preferences for non-traditional, child-free life choices. Increased childlessness may also be contributing to low national fertility levels. Some scholars explicitly relate low levels of fertility to the social and cultural changes that are affecting women's lives. In countries where such changes have not been followed by adequate societal adjustment (i.e. by an increase in institutional support to the family and by a fairer sharing of tasks between partners), women may be forced to make stark choices between work and family and, it is argued, fertility has consequently fallen to very low levels (McDonald 1997, 2000). We might therefore be led to expect relatively high levels of childlessness in low fertility contexts, but this is not always supported by available evidence. This paper addresses the question of why this might be so by investigating childlessness in two countries - Britain and Italy - with contrasting fertility and welfare regimes.

To introduce the study, the differences between the two countries with respect to their welfare regimes (liberal vs. familistic), levels of secularization, attitudes to gender roles, family models and fertility levels are briefly reviewed. Current fertility in Britain is relatively high (in 2011 period TFR was 1.73 in Scotland and 1.98 in England and Wales), while Italian fertility (period TFR was 1.41 in 2011) has long been among the lowest in Europe. However, Italy's low fertility is mostly attributable to the dramatic drop in second and (even more) in higher order births rather than higher levels of childlessness, suggesting that the normative parental imperative has generally been fulfilled. Rather, it is in Britain, where the two-child norm still predominates but there is a more dispersed distribution of completed family sizes, that women appear more likely to choose a child-free lifestyle.

The main analyses then exploit information on respondents' current parity and their future fertility intentions, focusing on those who are childless at interview and looking at whether or not they intend to have children in the future. Compared to studies of permanent childlessness among individuals who have completed their reproductive period or cross-sectional analyses of being childless at a given age, this approach has the double advantage of studying childlessness in cohorts of reproductive age that are currently contributing to the observed period fertility levels, and of allowing us to distinguish between intended childlessness (those who not have, and do not plan to have, any children) and provisional childlessness (those currently childless but who plan to have children in the future).

Our research questions draws inspiration from two recurrent themes in the literature on childlessness and fertility intentions. First, although research on fertility tends to focus primarily on women, several studies show that the inclination towards permanent

childlessness (as well as its determinants) might differ between men and women. Furthermore, when there are conflicting preferences, disagreement is as likely to be resolved in favour of the woman view as that of the man (Thomson and Hoem, 1998; Berrington, 2004; Istat, 2009; Testa et al., 2011). Thus, since the perspectives of both genders can be expected to inform fertility intentions and behaviour, our study considers the profiles of both childless women and childless men in relation to intended future fertility.

Second, diverse institutional settings and cultural traditions, as well as differences in the onset and progression of recent family transformations imply a great diversity in the levels and character of childlessness (Sobotka and Testa, 2009). Therefore countries with similar levels of completed fertility may display completely different proportions of childlessness, and vice versa. Within the same country, both the spread and social acceptance of childlessness might vary across contexts. For instance, recent research on spatial fertility variations in Britain has highlighted the role of large cities as low fertility contexts (Graham, Fiori and Feng, 2012), and leads us to expect that intended childlessness may be similarly influenced by metropolitan contexts.

Thus, the following three research themes and related questions are addressed:

1. *Gender differences*: Are men less likely to express the intention of remaining childless than women? And do the factors associated with intended childlessness differ between men and women?

2. *Lifestyle geographies*: Is intended childlessness associated with the opportunities for alternative lifestyle choices available in large cities?

3. *National differences*: What are the main differences between the two study countries in the profiles of those intending to remain childless? And what do these differences suggest about the choices facing women?

Data and Methods

The analyses are based on sample data from two recent nationally representative surveys:

- (a) the ISTAT Multipurpose Survey “Famiglia, Soggetti Sociali e Condizioni dell’infanzia”, 2009 edition for Italy;
- (b) the first wave of *Understanding Society*, which refers to the year 2009-2010, for Britain.

We focus on respondents aged from 20 to 40 years old living with a partner. The selected samples consist of around 8 thousands respondents living in Italy and 14 thousands respondents living in Britain. The difference in size between the two sub-samples is partly related to the later age at which Italian adults enter a union, as confirmed by the generally older age profile of selected respondents. Only 12% of men and women living with a partner are aged below 30 in the Italian sample, compared with 26 % in the British sample. The delay in starting a co-resident union also translates into the late onset of childbearing. Among respondents with children, 8% are aged below 30 in the Italian sample whereas the proportion is 18% in the British sample. The descriptive analyses highlight a lower propensity towards childlessness among respondents in a couple in Italy compared to Britain. The proportion of respondents who are childless is close to 16 % in Italy and above 22 % in Britain. Further, the proportion of this group who intend to remain childless is also lower in Italy: around 16 % of childless Italian women and 20% of childless Italian men do not intend to have a child in the future, compared with 21% and 24% respectively for British women and men.

To address our research questions, multivariate models predicting intended childlessness are fitted separately for the two countries, and for men and women. The analyses control for sample selection bias by modelling childless intentions of childless respondents conditioned upon the probability of being childless at interview. Covariates include measures for age, union type and duration, education, employment, tenure, family of origin and perceived health status.

Results

Selection equation: being childless at interview

As expected, results show that there is a clear life-course dimension to childlessness: respondents who are younger than 30 and have been living with their partner for less than two years are most likely to be childless at interview. Also, current or past experience of informal cohabitation is associated with a higher likelihood of being childless. Childlessness is more common among respondents with higher education and those who are in gainful employment, although with some gender differences across the two countries. Housing tenure is a significant predictor only for Britain, where respondents in privately rented accommodation are more likely to be childless. Poor health conditions hinder fertility, especially for women. Experiences in the family of origin also affect the chances of being childless later in life. In particular, growing up with no siblings is associated with a higher likelihood of being childless at interview. Lastly, the context of residence is a significant predictor of current childlessness for the Italian sample, with respondents living in large metropolitan areas more likely to be childless.

Intending to remain childless

The second equation of the model estimates the probability that childless respondents intend to remain childless. Below we report the key findings with regards to the three research themes outlined in the introduction.

Gender differences

Demographic variables, such as age, union typology and union duration, have the same direction for both men and women. Childlessness intentions are more common among older respondents, those who have been with their partners for a longer period, and those who have experience of cohabitation (either current or in the past).

On the other hand, gender differences are observed in the effect of the socio-economic variables. For instance, in Britain, highly educated women are less likely to intend to remain childless but there are no significant differences across educational levels for men. Moreover, employment status has the opposite effect for men and women net of other variables: men not in employment are less likely to intend to remain childless whereas women not in the labour force are more likely to express such an intention. Lastly, women living in social housing are less likely to intend to remain childless, but there are no significant differences across tenure for men.

Lifestyles geographies

The selection equation showed that, in Italy, both men and women living in metropolitan areas are significantly more likely to be childless at interview than those living in smaller cities, whereas British men in rural areas are more likely to be childless than their urban counterparts. With respect to fertility intentions, no significant effects are observed for men, or for the Italian sample. However, we find that British women in rural areas are more likely

to intend to remain childless compare to woman in urban contexts. This finding must be interpreted with caution because it may be an artefact of the geographical categorisation of the British data.

National differences

In both countries, for those who are childless at interview, intentions to remain childless are higher among older respondents, and for those in a long-lasting partnership. However, only demographic variables (including union type for women and union duration for men) seem to matter in Italy. In Britain, by contrast, socio-economic variables such as employment, education and housing tenure also play a role. While men outside employment are less likely to intend to remain childless, it is women living in social housing who are less likely to declare an intention to remain childless.

Discussion and Conclusions

Descriptive analyses show a lower propensity towards childlessness - but a marked delay in union formation and childbearing - in Italy compared to Britain. The multivariate analyses confirm the existence of gender differences, the potential influence of life-style geographies, at least in Italy, and important national differences, which highlight the greater influence of social class in the British compared to the Italian setting. The discussion offers an interpretation of these results and concludes by drawing out the implications for understanding contemporary fertility levels in both countries.

Each of the research questions outlined above is addressed. Gender differences are interpreted in relation to more traditional attitudes to gender roles in Italy than in Britain; life-style geographies are discussed in relation to greater possibilities for pursuing childfree life-styles in large urban areas, as well as the greater propensity for metropolitan couples to cohabit; and national differences provide a comparative overview that links to distinct fertility regimes in each of the two countries. In Italy, for example, childlessness is often the side-effect of a generalized and excessive delay in union formation and thus the onset of childbearing. Decreased fecundity at later ages implies that even positive fertility intentions can no longer be fulfilled. In Britain, on the other hand, being and intending to remain childless appears to be the more conscious choice of selected socio-economic subgroups. Women with medium educational attainment, for instance, are much more likely to intend not to have any children compared with women with high educational attainment, which suggests that these women have more to gain from remaining childless than their better educated peers.

The final sections of the paper review the limitations of the study, present proposals for future research and draw out the implications of the results for understanding contemporary fertility levels in both Italy and Britain. We argue that it is important to recognise the differences between those who intend to remain childless and those who do not have children for biological or other reasons. The choices individual couples make in specific national and subnational contexts are also influenced by prevailing norms, which may be related to gender roles or to ideas on the merits or otherwise of different family sizes. Overall, the study provides an important insight into the different pathways by which childlessness impacts on national fertility levels.

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