

# Employment trajectories, union histories and childlessness in France and Italy

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## ABSTRACT

Childlessness is now increasing in almost all European countries for birth cohorts born since 1945 to 1965. Italy and France represents two interesting cases to study the phenomenon: the first is characterized by a rapid increase in the prevalence of childlessness and by one of the highest level among women born in 1965 (24%), while the latter is traditionally characterized by low and almost stable level of infertility (around 10%).

Childlessness is rarely the result of an early and ultimate decision, but rather the outcome of a continuous conditioned process throughout life influenced by many factors, including past experiences, different events, the context. In this paper we propose to supplement the “static” approach of the study of determinants with a life-course one. The primary focus is to shed a new light on the trajectories leading women and men who remain childless in Italy and in France.

French data from Gender and Generation Survey’s first and second waves (2005 and 2008) and Italian data from Family and Social Actors survey (2003 and 2009) will be used. Men and women aged 40 to 70 were selected and their working career (by distinguishing full-time employment periods, part-time employment periods and unemployment periods) and their marital history (by distinguishing periods during which individuals are in a couple and those during which they are without partner) have been reconstructed. The population is divided into two groups: parents and childless individuals. In each group we perform a sequence analysis using Optimal Matching tools. These two typologies will be compared in order to highlight features of paths leading to childlessness. Then, we will use variables which influence family size to consider to what extent they shape the likelihood of having a certain type of path. First results on a previous similar study on France are encouraging.

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## **EXTENDED ABSTRACT (15.11.2013)**

### **Context and research question**

After a decline for the cohort born during the first half of the 20th century, childlessness is now increasing in almost all European countries for birth cohorts born since 1945 to 1965. Today, levels vary sensibly among countries. Its prevalence is still limited in some countries as in France (around 20% for the cohort born in 1965) while reached 13% in 1965 female cohorts in Denmark, Sweden and Spain, 15% in Poland, 20% in England (Frejka, Sardon, 2006), 24% in Italy (OECD 2011) and more than 25% in Germany (Breton, Prioux, 2010). In the current demographic context characterized by low fertility, childlessness has become one of the most important reasons to explain variations in the overall fertility in Europe (Devolder, 2005). But it is also true that the negative relationships between completed cohort fertility and the prevalence of childlessness is becoming weaker and weaker across the cohorts: today, countries with similar levels of completed fertility can be characterized by different proportions of childless women. Recent patterns thus suggest that theoretical explanations behind childlessness may differ from those concerned with low fertility as a whole, urgently demanding new theoretical approaches and new empirical studies.

In this paper the primary focus is to shed a new light on the trajectories leading women and men who remain childless in Italy and in France. Numerous studies have highlighted the individual determinants of childlessness: socio-demographic characteristics (age, sex, union status), socioeconomics (educational attainment, socio-occupational status), values and cultural (religious practice, Attitudes and opinions about gender roles in family life, importance of professional life and family involvement) or childhood socialization (geographical and sociological parental origins, size of the siblings) (Mencarini, Tanturri, 2006, 2008 ; Robert-Bobée, 2006 ; Parr, 2007 ; Keiser, Dykstra, Jansen, 2008 ; Portanti, Withworth, 2009 ; Breton, Prioux, 2010 ; Miettinen, 2010)

We propose to supplement the “static” approach with a more dynamic one, similarly to the approach recently followed by Mynarska et al. 2013. Indeed, the trajectory approach is of paramount importance to understanding the mechanisms leading to childlessness. Individual paths are very different; they alternate between periods of voluntary and involuntary infertility (Donati, 2000). Childlessness is rarely the result of an early and ultimate decision. It can be seen as a continuous conditioned process throughout life influenced by many factors. Those factors include past experiences and different events of the employment trajectory, union histories or insurmountable hurdles (Bulcroft, Teachman, 2004 ; Keiser, Dykstra, Jansen, 2008). There are many childless people whose fertility intentions are uncertain and who are continually postponing their first birth until it is no longer possible to have a child (Barrington, 2004). There is also the opposite case of people who initially want to have children, but then they become accustomed to childless way of life and they do not want to change it anymore. Therefore infertility is often the outcome of a lack of positive decision than of a negative informed decision (Tanturri 2006).

The Hakim Theory (2000) assumes that women developed, during childhood a preference for either a family or for a professional career. The latter category more frequently turns away parenthood. This theory focuses on the “choice” of childless women who prefer professional and social success. On the contrary, other studies highlight the difficulties of the work-family balance, especially in countries where a gender inequality still exists and where maintaining a career while

having children is difficult: highly educated women who want to have career more frequently put off having a child. The cleavage theory between people who are “career oriented” and others more “family oriented” have to be confronted with longitudinal data: **to what degree does the employment trajectory of childless people differ from that of people who succeed in work-family balance?**

The union history is also critical with regard to infertility, because the majority of births occurs in a couple: time past living in couple, the timing of the first union, and the union stability greatly influence the probability of having (or not) at least one child. Considering that union is the first step of a family trajectory, **are individuals who are “career oriented” more likely to avoid having a child, avoid being in couple, or more likely to avoid to separate?**

We will adopt a comparative perspective. Indeed, these trajectories exist within a specific social, cultural and political context. Italian fertility is one of the lowest in Europe where infertility has rapidly increased and today is very high. The work-family balance is not easy in Italy and gender role-set is still shaped in a quite traditional way (Mencarini, Tanturri, 2006). Conversely, France has a high fertility rate as well as a low level of childlessness, which was traditionally very low. Family trajectories are more diversified (half of births are outside of marriage) and working for a mother with a young child is viewed positively. Family policies promote work-family balance through numerous child-care solutions (Brachet, Letablier, Salles, 2010). These two very different contexts greatly influence individual family strategy. Therefore it is interesting to investigate whether **childlessness is the outcome of similar paths in Italy and in France** and if the differences in the prevalence of childlessness concern mainly the **degree of diffusion of these “specific”** (and in the case of involuntary childlessness “unfortunate”) **paths in the two countries.**

## **Data source**

For France we use data from Gender and Generation Survey’s first and second waves (conducted in 2005 and 2008). For Italy, the data comes from the Famiglia e Soggetti Sociali survey (Family and Social Actors) conducted in 2003 and 2009 for Italy. The dates of all marital events and employment events of each individual, which are central elements of our study, are detailed in those two surveys. However, the comparative dimension of our study would be made easier if standardized GGS databases were also made available for Italy.

## **Method and expected results**

We have selected men and women aged 40 to 70 and we have reconstructed their career (by distinguishing full-time employment periods, part-time employment periods and unemployment periods) and their marital history (by distinguishing periods during which individuals are in a couple and those during which they are without partner). The population is divided in two groups: parents and childless individuals. In each group we perform a typology of life courses using Optimal Matching tools. These two typologies will be compared in order to highlight features of paths leading to childlessness. Then, we will use variables which influence family size to consider to what extent they shape the likelihood of having each type of path. It will also be possible to consider generation effects.

In a previous work limited to France sample<sup>4</sup>, we selected childless men and women born between 1956 and 1965, using French GGS's first wave database. We performed an Ascending Hierarchical Classification with the following variables: number of years spent in a relationship between 15 and 40 years old, previous births of the partner, age at first union, socio-professional category at the date of the survey, educational attainment, number of siblings, religious affiliation and family value. The group of childless individuals was thus divided into six:

- 1 A group composed of 80% of women, with a high level of education and a high-status occupation. They spent more than ten years with a partner, they enter their first relationship at young ages (before 25) and often they have known at least two partners.
- 2 A group exclusively composed of men, with a low level of education, working as farmers or craftsmen. They entered their first union later (after 35) and they spent less than ten years with a partner. This group of men highly value family life.
- 3 A group made of 50% men/50% women with a low educational attainment and low-status occupation (most of them work as employees or workers). They committed themselves into a relationship after the age of 35 and broke up during the ten following years. Often their partner had at least one child from a previous union.
- 4 Men and women, with a high educational attainment and high-status job. They do not practice any religion and they do not value family life. They have a short marital experience: they were over 35 at their first union, and they spent less than ten years with a partner.
- 5 A group composed with individuals whose marital history's features and occupational statues are quite similar to those of individuals in the fourth group (men and women, high level of education, high-skilled job, short amount of time spent in a union). But unlike the previous group, men and women of this group highly value family life and practice occasionally or regularly their religion.
- 6 A last group made up of men and women, with a medium or low educational level, who committed themselves into a stable partnership (more than ten years) begun before the age of 25. Individuals in this group highly value family life.

This study does not take into account information on the whole professional career (which was not available in the GGS's first wave) and the analysis was based on isolated characteristics of the respondents. Our study aims to complete as well as deal with this analysis in depth, with a pathway and comparative perspective.

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