Diverse Paths into Childlessness over the Life Course

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Introduction: Childlessness over the life course

In a literature on childlessness, a dividing line is frequently drawn between those, who wanted no offspring ("child-free", "childless by choice") and those, who desired children, but faced some obstacles in having them ("child-less", "childless by circumstances") (Basten, 2009; Carmichael & Whittaker, 2007; Connidis & McMullin, 1993; Koropeckyj-Cox, 2002; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008). In reality, a situation is much more complex. 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, Jacobson, & Holland, 1999; Heiland, Prskawetz, & Sanderson, 2008; Iacovou & Tavares, 2011). Even women, who made an early and explicit decision to remain childless (so-called "early articulators", Callan, 1983, 1984; Houseknecht, 1979) experience moments of doubts and ambivalence, which might make them reconsider once taken position (Letherby, 2002; Morell, 2000; 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 & 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 & 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 & 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). As Keizer and colleagues (Keizer, Dykstra, & Jansen, 2008) phrased it: thinking about remaining childless should be informed by two principles: that of 'cumulative contingencies' (impact of previous experiences) and that of 'linked lives' (impact of events in different life dimensions). Instead of looking for one single reason of childlessness, we should ask what life course developments may lead to it (Hagestad & Call, 2007). Previous research has shown that partnership, educational and employment histories are particularly important in this respect (e.g., Heaton et al., 1999; Keizer et al., 2008; Koropeckyj-Cox & Call, 2007; Lee & Gramotnev, 2006; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008).

Although a necessity to look at a 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 (González & Jurado-Guerrero, 2006; Hagestad & Call, 2007; Keizer et al., 2008), 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 & Whittaker, 2007; Hagestad & Call, 2007; Keizer et al., 2008; Kemkes-Grottenthaler, 2003; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008).

The life course approach to childlessness has inspired our study, too, but we employ a methodological perspective that allows for revealing the diversity of paths into childlessness. 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).

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 & 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 consider the life course complexity of each woman as a key entity.
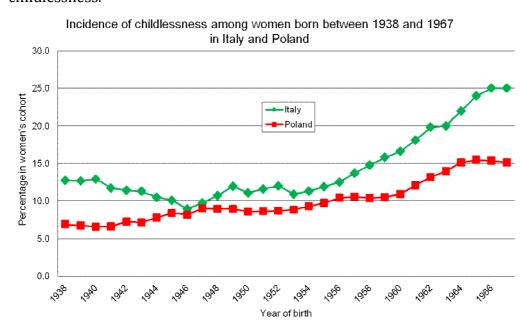
In order to describe the different path into childlessness we use sequence analysis with optimal matching algorithm. This method, originally developed for the analysis of protein and DNA sequences in bio-molecular studies, is however relatively new in social sciences (Abbott, 1995; Baizan, Michielin, & Billari, 2002; Baranowska, 2008; Billari, 2001). The basic idea behind optimal matching is to measure the pairwise (dis)similarity of sequences by considering the cost of transitions from one sequence to another.

The observation period we focus on is the central fecundity period of each woman. In the first step we compare typical (average) life courses of childless women versus mothers. But our main research aim is to reconstruct a variety of life courses of childless women. We consider women's education, employment and partnership histories and explore how these three life spheres intertwine and shape different pathways into childlessness.

Case studies: Italy and Poland

In this paper we aim to explore paths into childlessness over the life courses of Italian and Polish women. We have chosen these two countries as they have experienced a marked increase in childlessness in the youngest cohorts despite the extraordinarily strong attachment to family and Catholic values (Matysiak & Vignoli, 2011). Even though the increase is more rapid in Italy, both Italy and Poland are characterized by

particularly high levels of childlessness, compared to other countries in their respective regions (Frejka, 2008). These are especially information-rich cases to study childlessness.

Incidence of childlessness among women born between 1938 and 1967 in Italy and Poland
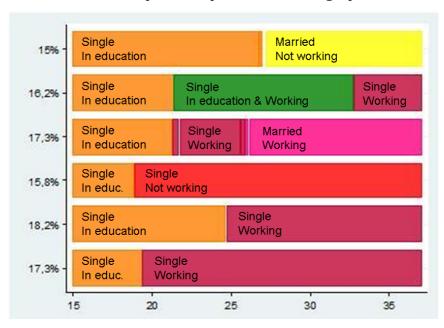

In order to conduct our study we consulted recent representative surveys for both countries, from which we selected subsamples of mothers and childless women aged 36-46 at the time of the interview. More precisely, for Italy, we used data from the Household Multipurpose Survey on Family and Social Subjects (2009), i.e. the national retrospective survey which 24,000 households for a total of almost 50,000 individuals. From this survey we retrieved information on 736 childless and 2756 mothers. For Poland, we referred to the 2011 Generations and Gender Survey, conducted on a representative sample of 20,000 individuals. This survey provided us with information on 758 mothers. Additionally, we consulted the 2011 FAMWELL Survey on Childlessness from which we retrieved information on 449 childless women. We assumed that a childless woman is one who did not have any biological, adopted or foster child, and did not help raising children of her partner. A mother is a woman who gave birth to at least one child.

Preliminary findings: Poland

In the first step, we constructed the typical, average life courses for mothers and childless women. This comparison has shown that the largest differences between the two groups relate to partnership and education. Mothers stay in education shorter than

their childless counterparts and they enter stable relationships shortly after they finish schooling and start working. Childless women continue studying longer and remain single for the vast majority of their lives. However, the adopted sequence analysis approach allowed us to disentangle this one, standard, average life course of childless women into different types of pathways. Cluster analysis, conducted on individual life sequences, revealed six different patterns, presented in the graph and the table below.

To interpret the above life sequences of childless women, it is necessary to explore each of them in great details. For example, the first type (single, in education → married, not working) consists of women who experienced lots of instability in their life course, which is not immediately apparent when looking at their life sequence. They managed to build a stable relationship (marriage) only when they were almost 30 year-old. But in fact, they started entering relationships rather early. These relationships were, however, rather short and almost half of these women experienced at least one break up. Consequently, "being single" is a dominant partnership status of these women for a large part of the observed period. Their situation in the labour market was even less stable: 13% of them had never worked, others were recurrently experiencing long episodes of unemployment (hence: a dominant status is "not working").

The initial analyses indicate that some pathways are rather easy to interpret, while other are more complex and challenging. We are considering numerous additional characteristics to understand them (e.g., social background, educational level, mean age at first union formation, experiencing separation or divorce, health problems and

disability, fecundity problems, fertility intentions at the time of the interview, etc.). The same procedures and the same set of variable will be considered for both analysed countries. A methodical comparison between various pathways will give us an opportunity to generate empirically grounded hypotheses on how different dimensions of individual life course intertwine, leading to childlessness.

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