Determinants of childlessness among men and women in Italy: does socio-economic status act in a different way?

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Abstract

This paper investigates the determinants of childlessness among men and women in later adult life in Italy, using data on a sub sample of 30-49 years old men (7,254) from the Multipurpose Italian survey, Family and Social Actors (2003). A weighted multinomial logit model is used to contrast "voluntary childless men (or women)" with other categories: the "un-voluntary childless" and fathers (or mothers). Covariates include background and early life course characteristics; family formation variables; work related features, attitudes and values. Results seem to corroborate the hypothesis that voluntary childlessness is a common behaviour among men and women, but its determinants partly differ, with particular regard to socio-economic status. In particular voluntary childlessness among men seems linked mainly to poor education, poor health and worse social status. Conversely among women the opposite is true: those with a university degree and a managerial position are more likely to be voluntary childless. Therefore, voluntary childlessness could spread in a different way across social classes. Family disruption or celibacy are common cause for not having and not willing to have children for both men and women, as well as secularisation and anti-traditionalist attitudes and the residence in the North of Italy.

Keywords: *voluntary childlessness, childless men, low fertility, fertility determinants, Italy.*

1. Description of the topic

In the last decades, European societies have experienced a rise in (in)voluntary childlessness (Sobotka 2009; Tanturri & Mencarini 2008). Today, countries with similar levels of completed fertility can be characterized by different proportions of childless women (OECD 2011). The patterns suggest that the factors influencing childlessness are somewhat different from those concerned with low fertility as a whole, but a comprehensive theory of childlessness is not well-developed yet and it is not clear how childlessness is now associated with socio-economic status and how it spreads across social classes. Only in the Anglo-Saxon countries there is a long tradition in this field, while in Southern and Eastern Europe studies are few and fragmentary and they are usually focused only on women's characteristics and behaviour.

Recent estimates of permanent childlessness for the cohorts born around 1965 reveal that it has become an increasingly large group in Italy (~25%). Therefore, in this paper we are interested to focus on the association between social status and childlessness in contemporary Italy, comparing men's and women's socioeconomic determinants of childlessness, in order to envisage a possible different diffusion mechanism by gender. The aims of this paper is to delineate profiles of childless men and women, distinguishing between voluntary and un-voluntary childlessness, and contrast them to fathers (and mothers), as a control group. It seems sensible to hypotheses that some variables are associated to childlessness similarly for both men and women (e.g. number of siblings), while other can affect the probability of being voluntary childless in a different way by sex. In particular our analysis will focus on socioeconomic status.

2. Background and research questions

Childlessness may include a variety of situations, with different implications for the understanding of reproductive strategies (De Rose, 1996; Houseknecht, 1983). A first basic distinction must be drawn between men who voluntarily refuse parenthood and those who are unable to have children (Bloom & Pebley, 1982).

It is not easy to identify the individual determinants of this behaviour: on the one hand data specifically collected to assess when remaining childless is a voluntary choice are rare and fragmentary (usually qualitative studies), on the other hand predictors do depend on the context and time, and results are not always consistent. Hakim (2005), for instance, finds that the European voluntary childless are distinctive group in terms of attitudes and values, but far less so in terms of social and economic characteristics (Hakim 2002). In other studies, however, education, social class and employment status seem to be important determinants for childlessness, irrespective of the

partnership status. Usually childlessness is associated with higher levels of education (Bachu 1999; Biddlecom and Martin 2006; Keizer, Dykstra et al. 2008; Kneale and Joshi 2008), but some recent studies give controversial results (OECD 2011). Two studies from Hoem et al. (2006) and Neyer and Hoem (2008), cast doubt on the assumption that higher education per se must result in higher childlessness: several factors – such as the field of education and the institutional context - may influence the relationship between education and childlessness. The role of household income, too, is ambiguous (Abma & Peterson, 1995; Bloom & Pebley, 1982; Heaton & Jacobson 1999, Hakim 2005). Childless women tended to have greater gender equity within marriages, to be less traditional, non-religious, employed in professional occupations, and to have experienced marital disruption (Heaton et al. 1992; 1999, Hakim 2005, Mencarini and Tanturri 2008). Other significant factors enhancing the odds of remaining childless are being an only child, or marrying late (Kiernan 1989, Bloom & Pebley 1982, Abma & Peterson, 1995; Abma & Martinez, 2002, Murphy and Wang 2001, Mencarini and Tanturri 2006). Further research is necessary to understand whether in Italy childless women are still strongly characterised by a different socioeconomic background.

Men's circumstances and attitudes are likely to form an important part of the explanation for childlessness among women (Parr 2007), but only very few studies have been dedicated to investigate the profiles of childless men and sometimes only incidentally (Perr 2007, Weston & Qu, 2001 on Australia; Kiernan 1989, McAllister and Clark, 1999 on Britain, Tanturri 2010 in Italy). Studies specifically on men show that childlessness determinants partly differ between gender, but also across countries. Family disruption or celibacy are common cause for not having and not willing to have children for both men and women, as well as secularisation and anti-traditionalist attitudes. Union formation and occupational variables are strong later life predictors of whether a man is childless, but the direction of the association is country dependent: in Britain the most educated men and those in professional occupation who were more likely to be childless (Kiernan 1989, Hakim 2005), while in Australia and in Italy the opposite is true (Parr 2007, Tanturri 2010). Father's and mother's occupations, the type of schooling and birthplace are important early life-course variables predictors of whether a man is childless in later life, in Australia (Parr 2007). According to these previous findings, it seems that the spread of childlessness among men has its own determinants, therefore integrating men in the analysis on childlessness is necessary to forecast the spread of the phenomenon across social classes.

A key question is whether the same characteristics may distinguish childless men and women respectively from fathers and mothers. In addition, it seems particularly interesting to identify which are the features that distinguish voluntary childless men and women (from mothers and fathers), and if they partly differ, as it has been found in other countries with specific regard to socioeconomic status.

3. Data and research methods

Our study is based on data from the Multipurpose Italian survey, Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 2003 in Italy. We select a sub sample of 30-49 years old men (7,254) and women (7,580). Importantly, the cohort born around 1960s are the first Italian cohorts to experience a significant rise in permanent childlessness.

We divide the sample into three categories: 1) fathers (or mothers); 2) "Voluntary childless men" (or women), defined as those having no children at the interview and declaring that they do not want to have children in the future; 3) "Involuntary childless men" (or women) are those having no children, but willing to have in the future.

A weighted multinomial logit model (Greene, 2002) is used to contrast voluntary and involuntary childless men (or women) to fathers (or to mothers). Our variable of interest is the socioeconomic status (using as a proxy both education and employment status). We keep into account four typologies of control variables: *early life-course characteristics*, *background characteristics*, *family formation variables,, attitudes and values.*

4. Preliminary results

The multinomial logit models explain a large part of variability among the different typologies of men and women (pseudo R square equal to 0.41 for men and to 0.34 for women). Celibacy (or having never been in union) is still the major cause for childlessness- no matter if voluntary or not - for both men and women, even if many singles at the interview do not exclude to have children in the future. Marital disruption is another factor strongly associated to childlessness in general, regardless gender. This result is consistent with the Italian context where parenthood is usually considered a couple decision: therefore, childlessness occurs as a sort of side-effect when couple has not been formed yet or has split off. As expected, voluntary childless men are more likely to be older and living in the North of Italy.

With regard to education, the association with voluntary childlessness is similar among men and women, in signs and in magnitude. If we consider the interaction between gender, age class and education level, we discover that among the older group the effect of education level on the likelihood of being involuntary childless are modest, while in the younger group , the effects are more important in magnitude and vary linearly with the education level and differ by gender in the signs. In other words, the more women are educated the more are likely to belong to the involuntary childless group while for men the opposite is true. So the mechanism of postponement because of the prolonged education seem to effect essentially childlessness among women, and not among men.

Conversely, men with a university degree are less likely to be voluntary childless, while for the most educated women the opposite is true. When we consider the interaction between age and education we notice that the opposite effect by gender is observed only among oldest group: less educated older men are more likely to be voluntary childlessness, while for older women the opposite is true. Among the youngest the probability is in any case lower - regardless the education level - and the effect have the same sign for men and women (bigger for women). Therefore we can argue that the socio-economic difference between childless men and women emerges only in proximity of permanent childlessness.

Childlessness among men –voluntary or not - is linked basically to unemployment or being out of the labour market for some reasons, while women with the same characteristics are more likely to be mothers. Conversely, having a managerial position prevent men from being voluntary childlessness, while for women the opposite is true (although the magnitude of the effect is rather small).

Also the socioeconomic status of the parental family can still play a role, even if the effect is obviously reduced when we include also socioeconomic status of the interviewee in the model. The effect of the family of origins social status is not univocal, but it seems that - others things being equal - having a more educated father increases the probability of being childless, regardless gender. Consistently with previous literature, those coming from larger families of origin are less likely not to have children and this holds for both men and women.

5. Tentative conclusions

Our results – despite their limits - seem to corroborate the hypothesis that the determinants of childless among men and women partly differ. In particular voluntary childlessness among men seems linked mainly to poor education, poor health and worse social status (e.g the unemployed). Conversely women with a university degree and a managerial position are more likely to be voluntary childless. Therefore, voluntary childlessness – whose diffusion today is still rather limited in Italy – could spread in a different way across social classes: it might become more and more common among both "power women" and "unsuccessful men". The implications for couples' fertility would vary according to the type of assortative mating. Not surprisingly, couples' fragility and permanent celibacy are still important factors associated to childlessness regardless gender, as well as secularisation, anti-traditionalist attitudes and the residence in the Central and Northern Italy.