



Diverse paths into childlessness over the life course



Monika Mynarska^{a,*}, Anna Matysiak^{b,c}, Anna Rybińska^d, Valentina Tocchioni^e,
Daniele Vignoli^e

^a Institute of Psychology, Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw, Wóycickiego 1/3, 01-839 Warsaw, Poland

^b Wittgenstein Centre (IIASA, VID/ÖAW, WU), Vienna Institute of Demography/Austrian Academy of Sciences, Vienna, Austria

^c Institute of Statistics and Demography, Warsaw School of Economics, Warsaw, Poland

^d Department of Sociology and Carolina Population Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Chapel Hill, NC, USA

^e DiSIA—Dipartimento di Statistica, Informatica, Applicazioni, University of Florence, Florence, Italy

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ABSTRACT

Remaining childless is a process which is influenced by the continuously changing context in which an individual woman lives, and by the many choices she makes in various life spheres over her life course. Most previous studies on this issue have compared mothers and childless women at the end of their reproductive years, and have sought to identify the primary reasons for childlessness by regressing measures of accumulated experience of life events on the probability of having no children. Such an approach does not allow us to capture the wide variety of paths to childlessness. Using sequence analysis we reconstruct the major life course trajectories of childless women and reveal the complexity of the life paths that lead to childlessness in the urban populations of Italy and Poland. We conclude that more reflection is needed when designing studies on childlessness, and that we will be unable to understand the complexities of the process of remaining childless unless better data and methods are implemented in these studies.

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1. Introduction: Childlessness over the life course

Remaining childless is rarely an outcome of a single decision and seldom occurs for a single reason. Fertility intentions are not stable, but rather change over time (Heaton, Jacobson, & Holland, 1999; Heiland, Prskawetz, & Sanderson, 2008; Iacovou & Tavares, 2011). A woman who had decided to remain childless might reconsider her position as a result of her individual development or life experiences (Letherby, 2002; Morell, 2000; Park, 2005). Another woman who had initially planned to have children might become accustomed to a childless lifestyle and abandon the idea of motherhood (Carmichael & Whittaker,

2007; Morgan, 1991). In yet another case, a woman might face obstacles to realizing her fertility intentions, such as an illness, the loss of a partner, or a difficult economic situation (Gillespie, 2003; Heaton et al., 1999; Lee & Gramotnev, 2006). Thus, remaining childless is a process. A woman is likely to repeatedly reconsider her decision about whether to have a child or to remain childless in response to her personal development and changes in her context. In addition, the decision is likely to be influenced by the many choices she makes in other life spheres (Campbell, 1985; Gillespie, 1999), such as education, employment, or partnership. Clearly, the life course approach (Elchardus, 1984; Giele & Elder, 1998) is useful in conceptualizing this process.

Two principles in particular should inform our thinking about remaining childless (Keizer, Dykstra, & Jansen, 2008): i.e., “cumulative contingencies” (all of the previous

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +48 669951252.

E-mail address: m.mynarska@uksw.edu.pl (M. Mynarska).

experiences which affect a person's current status) and "linked lives" (events in one dimension or career of a person's life influence all of the other dimensions and careers). However, previous studies have usually sought to identify the main reasons why a person remains childless and did not take into account the broader context of life course developments which might have led to childlessness. Consequently, the complexity of women's life careers and the diversity of childless women's biographies are largely hidden. Our goal in this paper is not to identify the determinants of childlessness, but rather to demonstrate that the life course trajectories of childless women are much more complex and diverse than the findings of previous studies would suggest. We argue that a more comprehensive and dynamic approach to investigating the process of remaining childless should be adopted: namely, one which takes into account the sequence and the spacing of events in various life careers, as well as the interactions between those careers.

In order to achieve our objectives we employ sequence analysis with an optimal matching algorithm. This approach allows us to reconstruct the biographies of childless women, taking into account developments in several life careers (e.g., employment, partnership, or education). We will be able to identify categories of childless women with similar life course trajectories, and to show the variety of the paths of their lives. We illustrate this approach by presenting an analysis of the lives of childless women living in urban areas of Italy and Poland. Although a wider selection of countries and milieus would be needed to fully capture the diversity of childless women's biographies, the comparison of these two settings can provide some important initial insights into the issue. Both Italy and Poland have experienced large increases in childlessness in recent decades. While these two countries have similar cultural contexts, they have different economic and political histories. In particular, Poland's past as a communist country likely means that education and employment play different roles in the biographies of Polish women than in the lives of their Italian counterparts.

In the following sections, we examine the question of which life careers are central in the decision to remain childless. We then discuss the contexts in which our study takes place and outline the methodology applied, illustrating its key advantages in studying childlessness. Finally, we present our results and offer concluding remarks, indicating possible directions for future studies.

2. Literature overview: Which life careers count?

A number of scholars have emphasized that childlessness is a dynamic process that should be analyzed from a life course perspective (González & Jurado-Guerrero, 2006; Hagestad & Call, 2007; Keizer et al., 2008). So far, however, relatively few studies have adopted this approach, and most of those which have attempted to do so relied on measures that cumulate information on individual experiences over the life course (such as time spent in a union or in employment), and then looked how these experiences affected the probability of having no children in order to

identify the main reasons for childlessness. This kind of approach is indeed helpful in establishing which life domains are most important in the process of remaining childless. The results of these analyses indicated that the most important domains affecting the decision to have children are a person's partnership, educational, and employment careers (e.g., Heaton et al., 1999; Keizer et al., 2008; Koropecjy-Cox & Call, 2007; Lee & Gramotnev, 2006; Tanturri & Mencarini, 2008).

Partnership history is the domain with the most obvious link to childbearing behavior. Being single is the most frequently cited reason for having no children (Connidis & McMullin, 1996), and having never been married is one of the strongest predictors of childlessness (Heaton et al., 1999; Keizer et al., 2008; Koropecjy-Cox & Call, 2007). Historically, marriage patterns played a crucial role in childlessness (Morgan, 1991; Rowland, 2007). Today, however, the probability that a woman will remain childless is affected less by whether she is married than by whether she is in a stable, co-residential relationship. Finally, the age at union formation might be even more important than the type of union, as late family formation might be a reason for having no offspring. The effect on childlessness of a woman's age at marriage has been well documented by recent and historical data (Keizer et al., 2008; Mattessich, 1979; Rowland, 2007; Veevers, 1971).

Educational history is another sphere of the life course that should be considered. For women, having a higher level of education has been linked to a greater probability of remaining childless (Bloom & Trussell, 1984; Heaton et al., 1999; Hoem, Neyer, & Andersson, 2006; Keizer et al., 2008; Koropecjy-Cox & Call, 2007; Sobotka, 2004). A prolonged education might lead to a significant postponement of childbearing, which increases the risk of ultimate childlessness. Moreover, a woman's involvement in education might be a sign that she has less traditional attitudes and a strong interest in self-development. Generally, studies have shown that acceptance of childlessness is greater among the highly educated (Koropecjy-Cox & Pendell, 2007; Merz & Liefbroer, 2012), and that women with higher educational aspirations are more likely to say they intend to remain childless (Kenkel, 1985; Lee & Gramotnev, 2006).

Finally, employment has been shown to be important for childbearing behavior, but the relationship between work and motherhood is complex. On the one hand, having a stable job brings financial stability, and may therefore create good conditions for childbearing (Heaton et al., 1999; Kreyenfeld, 2004; Matysiak, 2009). On the other hand, work and childbearing may be perceived as activities that compete for a woman's time and energy (Barber, 2001; Dorbritz, 2008; Willekens, 1991). Some studies have found that women do not necessarily believe that childlessness is caused by a conflict between work and family (Dever & Saugeres, 2004), and that a desire for motherhood is often accompanied by a desire to participate in the labor market (Matysiak & Mynarska, 2010; McQuillan, Greil, Shreffler, & Tichenor, 2008). Nevertheless, most studies have shown that, for women, being employed is associated with a higher probability of

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