

Determinants of childlessness among men and women: do they differ?

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Abstract This paper investigates the determinants of childlessness among men and women in adult life in Italy, using data on a sample of 30-49 years old men (7,254) and women (7,580) 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 variables, attitudes and values. Results 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. Conversely among women the opposite is true: those with a university degree and a managerial position are more likely to be voluntary childless. Couples’ breakdown or celibacy are important factors associated to childlessness regardless gender, as well as secularisation, anti-traditionalist attitudes, and the residence in the North of Italy.

Introduction

Permanent childlessness is on the rise in Europe, not only in Northern and Continental Europe, but also in Italy, where increasing numbers of women are forgoing motherhood (Frejka & Calot, 2001; Frejka & Sardon, 2004; Sardon, 2002; Gonzales et al., 2006). Among Italian women born in 1960, who have virtually completed their reproductive career, childlessness is relatively high: about 15%, from official data. According to Sobotka (2004, chapter 5), the prevalence of childlessness in Italy is projected to increase considerably if most recent age-specific first birth probabilities remains

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constant: about 23% for the cohort born in 1970 and more than a quarter of the generation born in 1975. The picture is projected to be different with only a moderate increase (17% for the cohort born in 1970 and 16% for that born in 1975) if one adjusts for *tempo* effects (Sobotka 2004).

Research on this topic is relatively underdeveloped in Italy, where up to just a few years ago, childlessness appeared to be essentially caused by traditional cause as either sterility or permanent celibacy. Conversely, recent studies (Mencarini and Tanturri 2006, Tanturri and Mencarini 2008) have shown that as many as a third of the women interviewees, who live with a partner and do not suffer from any particular physical impediment, are voluntary childless. The same research evidences that in several other cases, childlessness is the unintended outcome of delayed decision to have a child or the result of adverse external circumstances, particularly fragility of partnership.

Similarly to what happens for studies on reproductive behaviour, very little is known about childlessness among men and the factors associated to it. This is true not only for Italy, where the literature on childlessness is recent and not abundant, but also for Anglo-Saxon countries, where there is a longer research tradition in this field. Only few studies have been dedicated to investigate the profiles of childless men and sometimes just incidentally (Parr 2007, Weston & Qu, 2001 on Australia; Kiernan 1989, McAllister and Clark, 1999 on Britain). The relative shortage of studies on childlessness among men is of special concern also because men's circumstances and attitudes are likely to form an important part of the explanation of childlessness among women (Parr 2007). Women's aspirations to become mothers might be frustrated by men's attitudes, whilst in other cases other women attitudes to having children tend to follow those of the men in their lives (Cannold 2004). For instance, in Italy it has been found that differences of opinion between partners are not a negligible reason for forgoing parenthood intentionally, since around one third of voluntary childless women report it (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). Where disagreement exists, it was slightly more frequent for the man to be reluctant to have children (17 versus 14%) – according to what these women reported (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008).

A key question is whether the same characteristics may distinguish childless men and women respectively from fathers and mothers. In addition, it is interesting to identify the features that voluntary childless men and women have in common. It is therefore important to understand who these childless men are. Do they differ in terms of background variables? Or rather in terms of entry into union? Is it the case that these men manifest less traditional value orientation? The aim of this paper is to delineate profiles of childless men, distinguishing between voluntary and un-voluntary childless, and contrast them to fathers, as a control group. The results are compared with an analogous analysis carried out on childless women in the same age groups. These topics are examined using the Multipurpose Italian survey, Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 2003 in Italy.

Background

Childlessness is essentially defined by “a non event” and 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

people who voluntarily refuse parenthood and those who are unable to have children (Bloom & Pebley, 1982). In practice, however, the distinction is complicated. Many people delay parenthood to the point when it becomes unlikely, or impossible, in which case voluntary postponement transforms into involuntary childlessness (Rowland 1998). This brings to the fore the importance of the temporal dimension in this type of study and the useful distinction between temporary and permanent childlessness (Bloom & Pebley, 1982). Similarly, the boundary between choice and constraint may also be indistinct in many cases. For instance, failure to form a union may depend on choice (women and men may have lower preferences towards family life) or on circumstances (inability to find a suitable partner), or, a combination of both.

A number of predictors of voluntary childlessness have been identified from studies conducted exclusively on women, and therefore only hypotheses can be made on their association with male childlessness. Moreover the predictors do depend on the context and time. For instance it has been found that Italian voluntary childless women, in contrast to mothers, appear to be less religious; to come from smaller families of origin; to have cohabitated at least once in life; to have entered their first union later; to have had, in the initial period of their union, unstable occupations and flexible work schedules, and little leisure time, both for themselves and for their partner (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). Similarly, previous studies from the US, found that intentionally childless women tended to have greater gender equality within marriages, to be less traditional, non-religious (Heaton et al. 1992; 1999), highly educated, live in urban areas, employed in professional occupations, and to have experienced marital disruption (Abma & Peterson, 1995; Abma & Martinez, 2002). In more recent studies on the US, however, urban residence did not emerge as a significant factor (Heaton et al. 1999). The role of household income, too, is ambiguous: in certain studies it seems to have a markedly positive effect on voluntary childlessness (Abma & Peterson, 1995; Bloom & Pebley, 1982), whereas in others its impact is modest (Heaton & Jacobson, 1999). Kiernan (1989) identified other significant factors enhancing the odds of remaining childless, such as being an only child, or marrying late (see also Bloom & Pebley, 1982).

It seems sensible to hypothesise that some variables are associated to childlessness similarly for both men and women (e.g. number of siblings), while others can affect the probability of being childless in a different way by sex. The empirical evidence is fragmentary and in some cases contradictory. For instance Parr (2007) finds Australian men in lower status occupations and men who are not in employment being more likely to be childless, while the opposite has usually been found for women. Conversely, in a study conducted in Britain, especially amongst men who had experienced a broken marriage, the most ambitious, the highly educated and those in professional occupations are more likely to be childless (Kiernan 1999). Late entry into union and marital breakdown seem to be factors associated with childlessness regardless gender and country (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008, Parr 2007, Abma & Martinez, 2002, Kiernan 1999). 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. The importance of men's attitudinal variables, particularly attitudes towards family, work, money, leisure, health, and community, as predictors of their childlessness is highlighted by Parr (2007). Even if - in general - children are believed not to affect their father's career so much, 15% of Italian voluntary childless women reveal that their partner's career would have been hindered by a child (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008).

Data and descriptive findings

This 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). We include in the analysis the cohorts born around the 1960s who are the first to experience a significant rise in permanent childlessness in Italy.

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. Descriptive statistics are provided in Table 1. Typically, prevalence of childlessness decreases with age, while voluntary childless rises. Childlessness is slightly more common among men in both age groups, while voluntary childlessness is more spread among women. Gender differences are wider in the over-40-year-old group. Prevalence of voluntary childlessness is quite small, regardless gender and age class, less than 4%. (Table 1).

Table 1: Sample by sex, age and typologies. Three categories: involuntary childless, voluntary childlessness and fathers (or mothers)

Age	MEN				WOMEN			
	Childless				Childless			
	Involuntary	Voluntary	Fathers	Total	Involuntary	Voluntary	Mothers	Total
	Absolute number				Absolute number			
30-39	1,936	74	1,777	3,787	1,297	70	2,414	3,781
40-49	726	110	2,631	3,467	580	132	3,087	3,799
Total	2,662	184	4,408	7,254	1,877	202	5,501	7,580
	Row percentage				Row percentage			
30-39	51	2	47	100	34	2	64	100
40-49	21	3	76	100	15	3	81	100
Total	37	3	61	100	25	3	73	100

Source: Italian Multipurpose Survey - Family and Social Actors 2003.

Model results

A weighted multinomial logit model (Greene, 2002) is used to contrast voluntary and involuntary childless men (or women) to fathers (or to mothers). Five typologies of covariates are included:

- *early life-course characteristics*: parents’ level of education, father’s professional position, number of siblings;

- *background characteristics*: age, health status, own education, geographical residence
- *family formation variables*: marriage, permanent celibacy, divorce, either pre-marital or permanent cohabitation;
- *work related variables*: occupational status, type of position;
- *attitudes and values*: religiosity, traditional beliefs, gender-sensitiveness.

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 (Table 2a). Marital disruption is another factor strongly associated to childlessness in general, regardless gender (Table 2a). 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.

Consistently with previous results, those coming from larger families of origin are less likely not to have children and this holds for both men and women. 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.

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 (Table 2b). Conversely both men and women living in the Southern Italy have a lower probability to be childless, even when we control for traditional opinions and religious attitudes. Involuntary childlessness is more common among the youngest group than among the oldest, while for the voluntary childlessness the opposite is true, by confirming thus descriptive findings (Table 2a).

As expected, voluntary childless men are more likely to be older, living in the North of Italy, and to be only children (Table 2a). More surprisingly voluntary childlessness among men seems linked mainly to poor education, poor health and worse social status (Table 2a and 2b). Among women the opposite is true: voluntary childlessness is associated to a higher social status. *Ceteris paribus*, women with a university degree and a managerial position are more likely to be voluntary childless, and not mothers (Table 2 and 2b). In contrast with previous literature, cohabitation experiences (as a sign of adoption of non-conventional life-style) reduce the probability of being in the childless groups regardless gender.

However, the voluntary childless seems to be less traditionalist with regard to marriage (as they agree that “marriage is an old fashioned institution”), but not with regard to women’s role (as they agree that “a housewife is a self-fulfilled woman”) and this seems to hold for both men and women (Table 2b). The hypothesis that voluntary childless men and women may have a distrustful attitude towards people has not been confirmed by our findings (Table 2b). In agreement with previous literature, secularized people are more likely to be voluntary childlessness, but the marginal effect is higher for women than for men (Table 2b), probably because they are more select to a certain extent.

Table 2a: Results of weighted multinomial logistic regression analysis for characteristics predicting childlessness. Reference category (fathers and mothers). Baseline probability and marginal effects (continued...)

	<i>Fathers versus</i>		<i>Mothers versus</i>	
	<i>childless</i>		<i>childless</i>	
	<i>Invol.</i>	<i>Vol.</i>	<i>Invol.</i>	<i>Vol.</i>
Baseline probability	0.31	0.03	0.17	0.03
	<i>Marginal effects</i>		<i>Marginal effects</i>	
BACKGROUND				
Age (40-49)				
30-39	0.240	-0.022	0.181	-0.048
Health status (no chronic disease)				
chronic disease	-0.076	0.066	-0.039	0.006
Regional area (north)				
centre	n.s.	0.000*	0.004	-0.001
south	-0.079	-0.015	-0.024	-0.015
Education (high school)				
university degree	0.053	-0.003	0.031	0.009
compulsory or less	-0.053	0.005	-0.058	0.003
EARLY LIFE- COURSE				
Fathers' education (medium)				
high	0.043	0.005	0.027	0.005
no education	-0.035	0.005	-0.080	-0.013
Mothers' education (medium)				
high	0.027	0.004	0.006	-0.001
no Education	-0.008	0.003	0.067	0.026
Fathers' job (blue collar)				
manager	-0.011	-0.004	-0.004	0.004
white collar	-0.026	0.002	-0.003	0.007
other	-0.030	-0.001	-0.023	-0.002
unemployed	-0.038	0.009	-0.015	0.004
Number of siblings (1)				
0	n.s	0.016	0.040	0.002
2 or plus	-0.088	-0.005	-0.017	-0.004
FAMILY FORMATION				
Current marital status (in union)				
never in union	0.713	0.071	0.587	0.152
divorced/separated	0.359	0.014	0.148	0.049
Cohabitation (never cohabited)				
ever cohabited	-0.063	-0.014	-0.070	-0.015
Divorce (never divorced)				
ever divorced	-0.085	0.007	-0.023	-0.001

All estimates are significant at 5%, with the exception of those with an * that are significant at 1%.

N.s. are not statistically significant estimates.

Source: Italian Multipurpose Survey - Family and Social Actors 2003.

Table 2b: Results of weighted multinomial logistic regression analysis for characteristics predicting childlessness. Reference category (fathers). Baseline probability and marginal effects (...continued)

	<i>Fathers versus childless</i>		<i>Mothers versus childless</i>	
	<i>Invol.</i>	<i>Vol.</i>	<i>Invol.</i>	<i>Vol.</i>
Baseline probability	0.31	0.03	0.17	0.03
	<i>Marginal effects</i>		<i>Marginal effects</i>	
WORK-RELATED FEATURES				
Current type of job (White collar)				
manager	-0.007	-0.015	0.054	0.001
blue collar	-0.008	-0.007	-0.045	-0.002
other	-0.022	-0.009	-0.013	n.s.
unemployed	0.058	0.008	-0.087	-0.004
ATTITUDES AND OPINIONS				
Agreement with these statements (versus non agreement)				
a housewife is a self-fulfilled woman	-0.021	0.002	0.002	0.012
marriage is an old-fashioned institution	-0.051	0.020	-0.016	0.005
people are trustworthy	-0.016	0.005	0.010	0.008
Religious attitudes (religious)				
secularized	-0.022	0.017	-0.030	0.034
N (un-weighted)	2662	184	1877	202
LR Chi² (58 d.f.)	5,396,982			

All estimates are significant at 5%, with the exception of those with an * that are significant at 1%.
N.s. are not statistically significant estimates.

Source: Italian Multipurpose Survey - Family and Social Actors 2003.

Conclusions

This study tries to shed light on an unexplored research topic: male childlessness in Italy. Unfortunately our data do not allow to make any clear distinction between men who have never wanted to be parents (“early articulators”) from those who take this decision along the life-course, or, again, from those called “permanent postponers”, who go on putting off the moment to have babies in an imprecise future.

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.

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