

Understanding Childlessness Through Life Trajectories:

Evidence from Italy

Chiara Baldan, Annalisa Donno, Maria Letizia Tanturri

Department of Statistical Sciences, University of Padova, Italy

Short Abstract

In Italy childlessness prevalence has more than doubled from the cohorts born in the mid-40s and those born in the mid-70s. A few studies (Jalovaara 2017, Tocchioni 2018, Tocchioni et al. 2022) have clearly shown that childlessness needs to be studied in relation to individuals' life trajectories and that there is an extreme heterogeneity in paths leading to childlessness on the whole. What it remains unclear however is whether the growing complexity in the individual life course, with particular regard to relationship and career instability, fuels the increase of childlessness prevalence among the younger cohorts. Retrospective data from the most recent Multipurpose Survey on "Families, Social Subjects, and Life Cycle", conducted by the Italian National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT) in 2016, forms the basis of the analysis. We focused on a subsample of 2,135 childless individuals born between 1916 and 1971 (women aged at least 45 and men at least 50 at the time of the interview). Using sequence and cluster analysis on individual biographies, five clusters have been identified whose importance changes substantially across cohorts and by sociodemographic characteristics. Results highlight clusters representing singlehood with employment, solitary non-working trajectories, traditional trajectories with marriage events, a group predominantly of married women outside the workforce, and trajectories characterized by work and unions outside of marriage. Calculating the complexity index of each individual trajectory, this work shows that the growing complexity of biographies and the increasing importance of turbulent sequence of events in the life-course are becoming more and more important among the cohorts born after 1945 and if they are not a major factor yet, they could become crucial for the generations born after 1971. These findings help to understand the multifaceted nature of childlessness and its relationship with various life domains in Italy.