

Exploring lifetime childlessness in Belgium: the interplay of partnership trajectories and socioeconomic status

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BACKGROUND In recent years, there has been a growing focus in the literature on investigating partnership trajectories in the context of lifetime childlessness, adopting a longitudinal approach. These trajectories often exhibit periods of never-partnering and partnership instability. Nevertheless, it is relatively unknown how individual socioeconomic characteristics relate to the type of partnership trajectory an individual experiences. **OBJECTIVES** Using a longitudinal approach, we investigate the patterns of partnership trajectories associated with lifetime childlessness. We further investigate with how socioeconomic characteristics relate to the typical partnership trajectories associated with childlessness and the turbulence of these trajectories. **METHODS** We apply sequence and cluster analysis to administrative data of Belgian childless men and women born in six different cohorts 1970-1975 (N=91,589) and follow their partnership trajectories from age 18 to 49. We further address variations in patterns of partnership trajectories across multiple socioeconomic characteristics in a multinomial logistic regression. Finally, we assess how turbulent are partnership histories according to various socioeconomic characteristics. **RESULTS** Partnership trajectories split into four groups, labelled Never Partnered, Partnership Instability, Marriage and Cohabitors, with gender differences in terms of partnership states order and duration. Educational attainment, household income levels, employment status, the presence of a long-term disability, as well as homeownership status significantly influence the likelihood of experiencing one of these patterns of partnership trajectories. **CONTRIBUTIONS** This study represents the first exploration of lifetime childlessness with a longitudinal perspective using high-quality register data in Belgium. Our approach provides insights into the dynamic of partnership trajectories associated with lifetime childlessness and its interplay with individual socioeconomic characteristics. The study also considers how socioeconomic characteristics influence the sequences' turbulence.