

Childless by chance or by choice? An insight with in-depth interviews

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BACKGROUND

In recent decades, levels of childlessness have been increasing rapidly in most European Countries. Italy can be considered at the forefront of this rapid change, together with a selected group of countries, namely Finland, Switzerland, Germany and Austria where more than 20% of women ends their reproductive life without children (Miettinen et al. 2015, Sobotka 2016).

What is even more impressive in Italy is the speed of the change and the rapid diffusion of the phenomenon across cohorts and across regions: what we might call the “Childless Boom”, and that someone see as a sort of new “epidemic”. The proportion of childless women has doubled in one generation: just one woman out of ten among the cohort born in 1950 ended her reproductive life without children, while for the cohort born 27 years later (that might well represent the cohort of their daughter) the proportion is more than one out five (22%). These are among the highest level of childlessness ever registered in the world. At the same time, recent surveys continue to register a quite small proportion of Italian young women who state that they do not want children, o whose ideal number of children is equal to zero (the so-called childfree).

A burgeoning of publication has recently identified individual characteristics and biography of women (and in few cases also of men) that are associated to childlessness using basically retrospective survey data (mostly relying on Family and Social Subjects 2009 for Italy). However, is difficult understand the factors that in a decisional process make such a large part of women (and men) to opt for a childless life, in a context that apparently seems not to refuse parenthood ideologically.

Most studies focuses on the individual determinants of childlessness among women: socio-demographic (age, sex, union status) and socioeconomic characteristics (educational attainment, occupational status), values and cultural attitudes (religious practice, attitudes and opinions about gender roles in family life, importance of professional life and family involvement) or early socialization processes in childhood (socioeconomic status of parents, geographical origin, size of the siblings) (González & Jurado-Guerrero 2006; Hakim 2003; Hoem, Neyer, & Andersson 2006; Miettinen 2010; Portanti & Whitworth 2009; Szalma & Takács 2015; Tanturri & Mencarini 2008, Hudde 2018). Retrospective survey data have been used to assess which individual characteristics are more likely to distinct childless women (e.g. highly educated, more secularised, employed, only children) from the mothers’ group (Tanturri et al. 2016, Fiori et al. 2017, Kreyenfeld 2017), or which life-course paths are more associated to childless outcome (through sequence analysis methods) (Tocchioni, 2016).

However, it is difficult to study effectively what people evaluate to make the decision, and what the predominant elements that they do take into consideration and that can be decisive in choosing for parenthood or not are, as childlessness is basically characterized by a non-event.

The innovative idea of this paper is to rely on qualitative data from a study specifically designed to investigate childlessness (*Li(N)C. Lives with (No) Children*) on the factors driving both women and men to childlessness in their life-course decision making process.

OBJECTIVES

The aim of this paper is to investigate the decision making process in the life course leading to permanent childless among women and men. Through life stories and in-depth interviews, this paper highlights how people narrate their decision-making process in relation to possibly becoming parents or not. The idea is to evidence the circumstances that have been considered crucial in the decision making process (if any).

DATA AND METHODS

The qualitative analysis is based on 49 in-depth interviews and life stories with 33 Italian childless women and 16 childless men between 40 and 75 years old. Before the interviews all participants were introduced to the topic of the research and have given consent for the interview to be collected, recorded and used for research purposes.

All interviewees were initially asked to narrate their life story. After that, the researcher intervened with questions in relation to the story that had been narrated and subsequently asked open question around the following topics, if not touched in the story: childhood and family of origin; education and work; partnerships, union and romantic relationships; attempts to conceive, previous pregnancy, abortion or other relevant reproductive events; friendships; relationship to family and relatives in daily life; involvement in third-sector activities; plans, desires and fears for the future; perceived stigma; opinion on childlessness, infertility, IVF, surrogacy, LGBTQ parenting. Interviews lasted from 15min to 1hour and 45 min.

Each participant has been asked to fill in a survey collecting socio-demographic information which was administered by the researcher and was offered to self-administer a survey about intimate and sexual life.

All interviews have been transcribed verbatim, anonymized and coded using Atlas.TI software. They have then been analysed using a grounded theory approach (Strauss and Corbin, 1994). A number of codes have been induced from each text, groups of semantically related codes have been united in bigger categories. A second and third reading of all texts have been used to cross-check and harmonise the use of each code and category. Subsequently, an analysis of how people were narrating their own story has followed, in order to highlight what topics people chose and how these relate to how they narrate their reproductive life. For the aim of this paper, life stories and interviews have been analysed in order to highlight how people narrate their decision-making process in relation to possibly becoming parents or not.

RESULTS

The results illustrate how decision-making about becoming parents or not is rarely perceived as a one-off event in one's life. It rather emerges in people's life at different moments and includes different kinds of engagement on the part of the subjects.

Our data confirm existing literature about permanent childlessness sometimes resulting from a never ending postponement of parenthood or from postponement of parenthood and subsequent infertility. Moreover, our data show that for some people permanent childlessness is the result of a low engagement into making conception possible through unprotected sexual intercourse or through assisted reproduction, while for others it follows the deliberate decision not to conceive at a certain moment in life or to refuse or stop using given conception methods (i.e. artificial insemination; IVF; donor conception). Furthermore, our data allow to assess how decisions about not to become parents are negotiated by people every time they enter a union, engage in sexual intercourse, or choose a long-term contraceptive method, thus making it a decision that is constantly re-enacted throughout life by sexually active people.

Finally, our results also illustrate how childless adults who do not engage in parenthood by conceiving or adopting a child can be involved in parental tasks or duties, thus proving that belonging to a demographic category of childlessness does not prevent people from taking on parental roles.