Diverse Paths into Childlessness over the Life Course
Examples from Italy and Poland

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Perceiving childlessness as ‘voluntary’ or ‘involuntary’ is too simplistic.

Childlessness – rarely an outcome of a single decision or can be attributed to one particular reason.

Remaining childless should rather be seen as a PROCESS influenced by continuously changing context and by choices that individuals make in various life spheres over the life course.

Previous studies showed that union, education and employment histories are crucial but...

If researchers took a life course approach – they usually focused on childlessness as an outcome of all previous accumulated experiences.

We study childlessness as a process through sequence analysis (SA).
Sequence analysis

**Exploratory technique** (holistic perspective, i.e. acknowledging life courses as complex entities)

**Sequence:** SSSS $\rightarrow$ CCCC $\rightarrow$ MMMM $\rightarrow$ SSSS

**Objective:** to give a holistic view on the life-course

**What we can do with SA?**
- illustrate the order of events
- illustrate the diversity of paths leading to childlessness
- identify background factors responsible for a specific sequence
Trends in childlessness in Italy and Poland

Incidence of childlessness among women born between 1938 and 1967 in Italy and Poland

Source: Observatoire Démographique
Data description

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ITALY</th>
<th>POLAND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Urban population only</td>
<td>Urban population only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age: 37-46 at the survey date</td>
<td>Age: 37-46 at the survey date</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Sequence construction

Temporal unit of observation: month

Observation period of the sequences: from 15 to 37 years old

264 months of observation (22 years)

Time-varying variables for the sequence construction (three life spheres):

- In education (E0) or completed education (E1)
- Not working (W0) or working (W1)
- Not in a union (U0) or in union (cohabiting or married: U1)

12 possible states

E0W1U1
E1W1U0
...

...
Mothers vs childless women

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>ITALY</th>
<th>POLAND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Mothers</td>
<td>Childless</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% never in a union</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>56.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with tertiary education</td>
<td>15.3</td>
<td>19.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% never worked</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Childlessness strongly related to being single
- Childless women are more often highly educated, but the difference is not large in Italy
- Polish women – generally more into education and work
- Lack of employment – more often among childless women in Poland but among mothers in Italy
Childless women – typical life sequences

ITALY

Working married women

POLAND

Disadvantaged women
## Childless women – typical sequences

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>ITALY</th>
<th>POLAND</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Focus on education and work</td>
<td>19.5%</td>
<td>18.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Continuous education</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working single women</td>
<td>42.3%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Working married women</td>
<td>12.5%</td>
<td>17.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disadvantaged women</td>
<td>21.9%</td>
<td>15.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unstable economic situation</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>15.0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stay-at-home wives</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Conclusions

• **Singlehood** seems to be the most clear and visible determinant of childlessness

• **BUT**: no one clearly dominant path leading to childlessness, instead the paths are heterogeneous

• Apart from few differences between Italy and Poland (longer time in education and work in Poland), there are also many similarities in the pathways to childlessness in the two countries – to what extent are they universal?
Thank you!
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