

When men don't want. Exploring the profile of voluntary childlessness men in Italy

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Abstract

In Italy, very little is known about men who come to the end of their reproductive life without giving birth, and the factors that might have determined it. This paper investigates childlessness among men in later adult life in Italy, using data from the Multipurpose Italian survey, Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 2003. A weighted multinomial logit model is used to contrast voluntary childless men with the other categories: un-voluntary childlessness and fathers.

Four groups of dependent variables have been considered: early life course characteristics; family formation; work related characteristics, attitudes and values.

The results will be compared with an analogous analysis carried out on childless women in the same age groups. Some variables are associated to childlessness similarly by sex, while others can affect the probability of being voluntary childless in a different way for men and women (e.g. occupational position).

Keywords: *voluntary childlessness, childless men, low fertility, fertility determinants, Italy.*

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1. Motivation

Permanent childlessness is on the rise in Europe, not only in Northern and Continental European countries, but also in Italy, where increasing numbers of women are forgoing motherhood (Frejka & Calot, 2001; Frejka & Sardon, 2004; Sardon, 2002; Gonzales et al., 2006). Understandably, research on this topic is relatively underdeveloped in Italy, where up to just a few years ago, childlessness appeared to be essentially a “physiological” issue caused either by sterility or permanent celibacy.

Conversely, recent studies (Mencarini and Tanturri 2006, Tanturri and Mencarini 2008) have shown that besides the traditional physiological causes of infertility, "modern" motivations are emerging too. Using data from an ad-hoc survey carried out in five Italian cities in 2002 Tanturri and Mencarini (2008) show 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 childlessness. 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 men who come to the end of their reproductive life without giving birth, and the factors that might have determined 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 only incidentally (Perr 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 a further significant reason for forgoing parenthood intentionally: 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 (17.2 versus 14%)– according to what these women reported (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008).

Characteristics distinguishing Italian childless men (and the different categories among them) from fathers can only partly be hypothesized from past studies on childless women, therefore it is interesting to focus on men and compare their profiles with those of childless women. 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).

A key question is whether the same characteristics may distinguish childless men and women respectively from fathers and mothers. In addition, it seems particularly interesting to identify which are the features that voluntary childless men and women have in common. Voluntary childlessness in Italy represents a relatively new behaviour. If so childless men could be considered 'forerunners' in a context characterized by relatively high values of family life and children, low levels of gender equality within the family and also by inadequate opportunities for combining childrearing and work career. It is therefore important to understand who these 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 aims of this paper is to delineate profiles of childless men, distinguishing between voluntary and un-voluntary childlessness, and contrast them to fathers, as a control group. The results would be compared with an analogous analysis carried out on childless women in the same age groups. Third, we investigate the main reasons leading to childlessness by focussing on how voluntary childlessness can be associated with differences in value orientation, (e.g. in terms of religiosity, or traditionalism), and with high education. Our findings are tied to a range of theoretical approaches, some highlighting cultural change as the main drivers behind men's and couples' preferences, thereby changing fertility patterns (Park 2005, Rowland 1998, Houseknecht 1982), other emphasising the importance of structural constraints that makes parenting more onerous both financially and in terms of opportunity costs (González & Jurado-Guerrero 2006)

These topics is examined using one of the Multipurpose Italian surveys, Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 2003 in Italy.

2. The context

Among Italian women born in 1960, who have virtually completed their reproductive career, childlessness is relatively high: about 15%, from official data; even higher according to recent data of 2003 Multipurpose Survey (our calculation). This makes Italy more similar to the Northern European model (Ireland, Sweden, Belgium, or Denmark), than to the Mediterranean one (Portugal, Spain and, in part, France), where childlessness is still rare (Toulemon, 1996). The U-shaped time trendⁱ across Italian cohorts reproduces, with some delay, the same trend observed in many Western European nations (Frejka et al. 2001; Prioux, 1993; Rowland 1998): starting from 17% at the beginning of the century, declining to 9% immediately after World War II, and consistently higher thereafter, reaching more than 20% recently (Istat 1997, 2003). 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 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).

It is also of interest to note that the overall level of Italian childlessness is comprised of rather heterogeneous *regional* trends. Whereas overall fertility was higher in the South, the remaining unmarried and childless was in fact more common. This is in contrast to the North, where overall fertility was lower, but where childlessness was less common (Santini, 1995). The situation has recently completely reversed. Therefore, these patterns indicate that most likely the causes of childlessness have changed over time.

3. Definitions of childlessness in Italy and predictors of voluntary childlessness

Childlessness 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 men who voluntarily refuse parenthood and those who are unable to have children (Bloom & Pebley, 1982). In practice, however, the distinction is complicated. Many men 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 may have lower preferences towards family life) or on circumstances (inability to find a suitable partner), or, a combination of both.

Clearly, childlessness will play a role towards overall fertility levels. Given recent figures for Italy, it seems plausible that the rise of permanent childlessness is an important dimension of its low fertility. However, to our knowledge a substantive theory for understanding the recent rise in childlessness in general and in particular in Italy, has not yet been developed. In part, the underlying reasons may coincide with those that determine low fertility (Kohler et al., 2002) and late childbearing (Ongaro, 2004), generated by increases of both direct and indirect costs of children (De Santis & Livi Bacci, 2001), familismii (Dalla Zuanna, 2001), lack of gender equality in the division of domestic tasks and childcare (Ongaro, 2002; Mc Donald, 2000), etc. Nevertheless, there may also be specific reasons why increasing proportions of women and men even choose not to have one child. Voluntary childlessness breaks with the norm of “strong biological predisposition to nurturing behaviour and motherhood which is arguably instinctive in the human race” (Foster, 2000). A more careful evaluation of the reasons behind voluntary childlessness is clearly relevant in a context where the consensus of the literature is that almost all couples desire to have at least one child (De Sandre et al. 1997; 1999; Goldstein et al. 2003).

A number of predictors of voluntary childlessness have been identified from other developed countries. These studies are empirical and based on large samples. The predictors, however, do depend on the context and time, and above all they usually are referred to women and not to men. Early 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, however, urban residence did not emerge as a significant factor (Heaton & Jacobson, 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).

For men, particularly among those who have experienced a broken marriage, it was the most educated and those in professional occupation who were more likely to be childless in Britain (Kiernan 1989). Different effects have been observed in Australia, where men with higher occupational status are less likely to be childless (Parr 2007)

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 (Parr 2007). Nuptiality and occupational variables are strong later life predictors of whether a man is childless. The importance of men's attitudinal variables, particularly attitudes towards family, work, money, leisure, health, and community, as predictors of his childlessness is highlighted by Parr (2007).

4. Data, methods and expected results

Our study is based on data from the Multipurpose Italian surveys, Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics in 2003 in Italy. We select a subsample of men aged 30-49 (7,254 men), to carry out some descriptive statistics (Table 1), but the core analysis will be conducted only on the oldest segment of the sample (40-49), an age range that we deemed old enough to provide information on permanent childlessness, but also sufficiently young to recall the details on reproductive choices with relatively little recall bias. Importantly, these are the first Italian cohorts to experience a significant rise in childlessness.

The aims of this paper is to delineate profiles of childless men, distinguishing between voluntary and un-voluntary childlessness, and contrast them to fathers, as a control group. Prevalence of childlessness on our sample by sex have been provided in Figure 1. "Voluntary childless" men are defined as those having no children at the interview and declaring that they do not want to have children in the future. "Involuntary childless" are those having no children, but willing to have in the future. In Figure 2 the proportions of voluntary childless among men and women without children have been illustrated. A weighted multinomial logit model (Greene, 2002) is used to contrast voluntary childless men with the other categories.

We keep into account four typologies of variables:

- *background characteristics*: such as parents' level of education, parents' professional position, number of siblings, own level of education, ;
- *family formation*: e.g. cohabitation, either pre-marital and permanent, divorce, permanent celibacy;
- *work related variables*: e.g. occupational status, type of position;

- *attitudes and values*: e.g. religiosity, traditional beliefs, gender-sensitiveness.

Table 1. Amount of the sample by sex and age. Three categories: involuntary childless, voluntary childlessness and fathers

	Involuntary childless men	Voluntary childless men	Fathers	Total
30-39	1,936	74	1,777	3,787
40-49	726	110	2,631	3,467
Total	2,662	184	4,408	7,254

	Involuntary childless women	Voluntary childless women	Mothers	Total
30-39	1,297	70	2,414	3,781
40-49	580	132	3,087	3,799
Total	1,877	202	5,501	7,580

Source: Italian Multipurpose Survey - Family and Social Actors 2003

The results will be compared with those obtained from an analogous analysis carried out on childless women in the same age groups. It seems sensible to hypothesise that some variables are associated to childlessness similarly for both men and women (e.g. number of siblings), while other can affect the probability of being voluntary childless in a different way by sex. For instance Parr (2007) found that 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.

Moreover, we investigate the main reasons leading to childlessness by focussing on how voluntary childlessness can be associated with differences in value orientation, (e.g. in terms of religiosity, or traditionalism).

Our findings are tied to a range of theoretical approaches, some highlighting cultural change as the main drivers behind men's and couples' preferences, thereby changing fertility patterns (Park 2005, Rowland 1998, Houseknecht 1982), other emphasising the importance of structural constraints that makes parenting more onerous both financially and in terms of opportunity costs (González & Jurado-Guerrero 2006). E.g. even if in general children do not

seem 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).

Figure 1. Prevalence of childlessness on the sample, by age class and sex

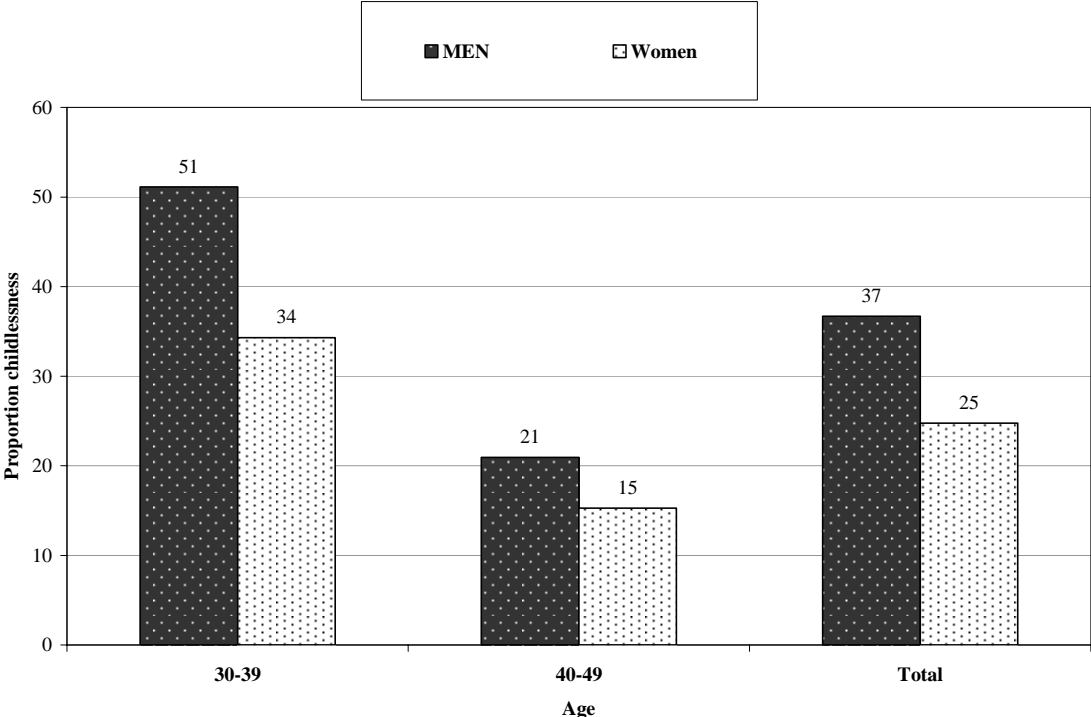
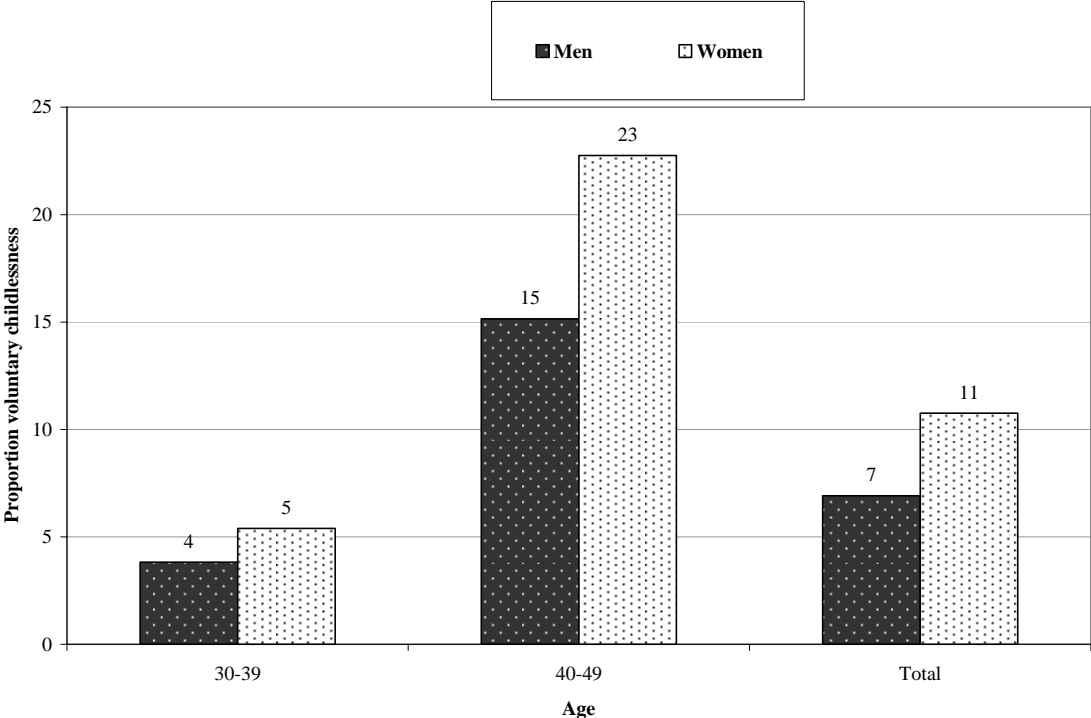


Figure 2. Prevalence of voluntary childlessness among those having no children, by age class and sex



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ⁱ Tentative explanations for this U-shape trend can be found in Poston & Trent (1982), Houseknecht (1982) and Rowland (1998).

ⁱⁱ The term familism refers to a model of social organisation where the family and its wellbeing are considered as the key unit. It represents a rather traditional perspective of society whereby loyalty, trust and a cooperative attitude within the family are key building blocks for societal cohesion. The literature has argued however, that familism cannot necessarily be equated with high fertility. There are two main arguments. The first argues that having a low number of children is a strategy to assure more privileges to each child. In the economics literature, this is commonly referred to as child quality. In other words, a familistic organisation may encourage child quality over child quantity. The second argues that the family is an inadequate institution for intergenerational care responsibilities in a modern society. As a result, couples may reduce fertility in response to insufficient provision of support.