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***Life Course Trajectories of Childless Women:
Country-Specific or Universal?***

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Introduction: Childlessness over the life-course

While historically childlessness was mostly associated with infertility or being single, today's childless women constitute a very heterogeneous population (Rowland 2007). There are different paths, leading to childlessness and various life-course contingencies that may result in having no offspring. Of course, being single continues to be an important factor in the process of remaining childless, but researchers notice that one should pay attention to educational and employment histories as well, as family and professional choices are closely interrelated (Heaton et al. 1999; Keizer et al. 2008; Koropecj-Cox and Call 2007; Lee and Gramotnev 2006; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). All in all, it has been emphasized that remaining childless should be perceived as a process: A product of continuously changing context, of individual developments and life course pathways, influenced by many choices made by an individual in other life spheres (Campbell 1985; Gillespie 1999).

Our objective is to explore different paths that lead to childlessness. Even though the literature advocates the importance of partnership, education, and employment careers for childlessness, previous empirical research have hardly taken into account how these careers unfold over the life-course. Only in some recent studies, the researchers take a more holistic view on the life-course trajectories of childless women (e.g., Mynarska et al. 2013, Tunalilar and White 2013, Breton, Flammant and Tanturri, 2014, Szalma and Takacs 2014). Informed

by these studies, we are advancing the research on life-course trajectories of childless women. We look at the diversity of trajectories of childless women within a country as well as across countries. The comparative approach allows us to verify whether the paths leading to childlessness depends on the country context or whether they are universal. To this end we selected several countries which experienced a pronounced increase in childlessness and which, at the same time, differ in institutional and cultural settings of fertility choices: Italy, Poland, the UK, the USA and Germany.

Methods and data

To describe the different life-course trajectories of childless women we use sequence analysis with optimal matching algorithm. This method embodies a holistic perspective on life courses and allows for illustrating their complexity. Clustering of similar biographies with optimal matching algorithm allows for constructing typical or “ideal-types” of life trajectories.

We analyze life histories of women, who are childless and have reached the age when having a child is highly unlikely (the age of 40). We consider women’s education, employment and partnership histories and explore how these three life spheres intertwined, shaping different pathways into childlessness.

In the paper we analyze data from Italy, Poland, the UK, the USA and Germany. The following data sources are used:

- **Italy:** Household Multipurpose Survey on Family and Social Subjects (2009), 1 261 childless women born 1940-1969
- **Poland:** Polish Gender and Generation Survey (2011), 601 childless women born 1939-1971
- **UK:** Understanding Societies (ISER) – first wave (2009), 341 childless women born 1939-1969
- **USA:** National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 (NLSY79) – waves until 2010, 465 childless women born 1957-1964
- **Germany:** ALWA Survey “Working and Learning in a Changing World” (2007-2008) - childless women born 1956-1968

Preliminary results and outlook

So far, the data from four countries have been analyzed (Italy, Poland, the UK and the USA). In all settings, childless women constitute a heterogeneous group and for each data set, at least six distinct life-course trajectories of childless women were distinguished. Interestingly, while we found a lot of heterogeneity in life-course trajectories of childless women within countries, we also identified some reoccurring patterns across the countries: several virtually identical clusters have been found in all settings.

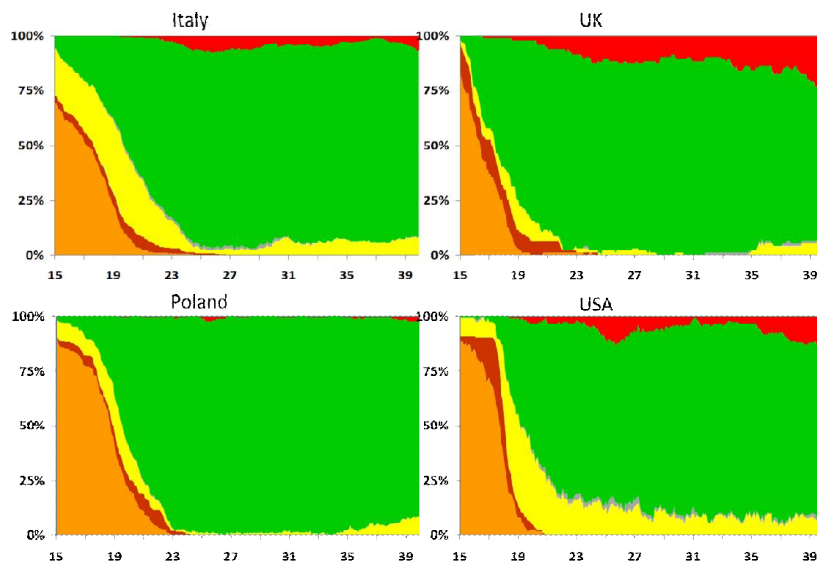
Table 1 lists all clusters that proved to be very similar across all analyzed countries. A brief description is provided for each cluster. It is also indicated how big share of childless women fell into a given category in each country.

Table 1 – Universal categories of childless women

Category	Italy	Poland	UK	USA
Low educated: single, working (they leave educational system early and continue working for the vast majority of their adult life, single)	24.6%	32.6%	27.9%	26.9%
Highly educated, focused on work (they complete tertiary education and stay active at the labor market for the vast majority of their adult life, mostly single)	10.3%	18.8%	21.1%	15.1%
Continuous education (they combine education and work, they start working rather early in the life-course, but they continue education or return to it while working)	8.6%	9.5%	5.3%	17.4%
Low educated: single, not working (they leave educational system early but do not enter labor market, single)	13.5%	3.5%	7.3%	4.7%
In a union, working (they vary in regards to educational attainment but they all work for the vast majority of their adult and enter a stable union at some point)	20.8%	20.3%	33.4%	20.7%
Total:	77.8%	84.7%	95.0%	84.8%

The life-course trajectories of women belonging to the above clusters were virtually identical in the compared countries. As an example we present life-course trajectories of childless women belonging to the first cluster (Figure 1). The patterns were similarly equal for the remaining four clusters.

Figure 1 – Cluster of single, working women with low education in different countries



Note: The graphs represent the distribution of the states within the cluster in each country at each month between the age of 15 and 40

- E0W1U1 - In Education, Working, In Union
 - E0W1U0 - In Education, Working, Single
 - E0W0U1 - In Education, Not Working, In Union
 - E0W0U0 - In Education, Not Working, Single
- E1W1U1 - Completed Education, Working, In Union
 - E1W1U0 - Completed Education, Working, Single
 - E1W0U1 - Completed Education, Not Working, In Union
 - E1W0U0 - Completed Education, Not Working, Single

In all analyzed countries, the vast majority of childless women fall into the five universal clusters presented in Table 1. Nevertheless, the sizes of these clusters differ considerably from country to country. For instance, the cluster of the highly educated women

focused on work is twice as large in the UK as in Italy. Moreover, we also distinguished several country-specific categories and they are briefly presented in Table 2.

Table 2 – Country-specific categories of childless women

Category	Italy	Poland	UK	USA
Stay-at-home-wives (they finish education early and enter stable unions shortly after but they do not work for the vast majority of their adult lives)	13.2%	4.8%	5.0%	-
Late labor market entry (these women experience a long period of unemployment after finishing education, single)	9.0%	-	-	-
Late marriage (they finish higher education and remain active on the labor market but enter stable union much later in their adult life)	-	-	-	15.2%
Multiple transitions (they finish education early and their adult lives can be characterized by many transitions on the labor market, mostly single)	-	10.5%	-	-
Total:	22.2%	15.3%	5.0%	15.2%

To summarize, there are several important findings of the study. First, it illustrates that there is a large diversity in life-course pathways related to childlessness within the analyzed countries. For instance, although childlessness is related to being single and to prolonged education most of all, we found also that in each country there is quite a large group of low educated and non-working childless women. Second, it shows that despite the within-country heterogeneity in life-course trajectories of childless women there is not much diversity across countries and many of the typical trajectories repeat across settings. This finding suggests that the paths into childlessness might be universal. Nevertheless, some cross-country differences have been identified and they will be systematically analyzed and discussed in the paper. We will also consider how the identified clusters are distributed across different cohorts, as our preliminary analyses have shown interesting differences in this respect as well. By exploring these differences we aim to better understand the contemporary trends in childlessness.

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