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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

CHILDLESS OR CHILDFREE?

A QUALITATIVE INSIGHT INTO CHILDLESSNESS IN ITALY

Maria Letizia Tanturri and Letizia Mencarini,

Department of Statistics "G. Parenti"

*University of Florence, Italy**

e-mail: tanturri@ds.unifi.it mencarin@ds.unifi.it

1. INTRODUCTION

Childlessness is an important and growing component of fertility decline in many European countries, including Italy where it is becoming an emerging issue. According to the most recent estimates by the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT 1997), more than one fifth of the Italian women cohort born in 1966 will close the reproductive life without children. In some Italian regions – in the North-East and in Sardinia, for instance - the proportion of childless women has been estimated to be even larger, up to 30%. If these estimates will prove correct, childlessness cannot be considered as a “residual” behaviour. On the contrary it is conceivable that an increasing number of women deliberately refuse motherhood.

The need to acquire individual data for women who never generate prompted a specific-purpose quantitative survey within the framework of a research project called *Low Italian fertility – economic constraints and changing values*¹. The CATI survey was based on a sample of 859 childless women – aged 40-44 - resident in five provincial capitals – the provinces of Florence, Messina, Padua, Pesaro and Urbino. Beside the traditional cause of infertility - such as permanent celibacy and sterility - the survey reveals the importance of voluntary childlessness, as more than half of the interviewees being in union state that they have never tried to have a child (Livi Bacci *et al.* 2003).

This result arises a new curiosity about the inner motivations and preferences of those women refusing motherhood deliberately. Therefore, 9 Focus Group were carried out in order to concentrate on those issues that have been usually neglected by quantitative analysis, such as identity, values, attitudes and motherhood representation. Only childless working women, currently married (excluding divorced or widowed) and with no physical infertility constraints have been invited to participate and discuss a variety of dimensions concerning their experiences.

This paper is aimed at analysing the information gathered during the above discussions. In particular, we are interested in assessing whether childlessness is the result of a deliberate choice, or rather the outcome of a continuous postponement or, finally, the consequence of other situations such as, for instance, partnership frailty.

The paper will be organized as follows: after a first paragraph dealing with theoretical issues, a second one will be dedicate to illustrate the data source and the sample. In the subsequent paragraphs results will be presented according to different dimensions. Paragraph 3 will illustrate some features of the “childfree” identity. The social pressure to have children and the way to cope with it will be examined in par. 4, while in par. 5 the decision-making process leading to childlessness will be analysed. In par. 6 attention will be given to costs, benefits and fears linked to motherhood. Par. 7 will

¹ Further information on the project is available at the web site: www.ds.unifi.it

discuss the possible policy measures that would encourage childless women to reconsider their decisions.

In the following paragraphs only a first and provisional synthesis of the main results has been given.

2. THEORETICAL ISSUES

Investigation of the issue of infertility presents a number of conceptual and practical difficulties, due respectively to problems of definition and a lack of adequate data. The ‘childless women’ group is very heterogeneous and it is difficult to come up with a single definition. From a logical point of view, *childlessness* simply denotes the absence of children, but it is immediately clear that the same concept includes a variety of situations. Infertile women may be distinguished according to the reasons that resulted in this condition, for instance sterility or sub-fertility, difficulties in personal relationships, economic reasons, voluntary choice; the temporal perspective, i.e., whether it is a permanent or a temporary condition; and the degree of commitment to the decision, whether, that is, it is renegotiable or taken once and for all (Housecknecht 1983).

Without venturing here into intricate questions of definition, in order to understand reproductive behaviour it seems essential at least to draw a distinction between women who *voluntarily* refuse motherhood (*voluntary childlessness*) and those who are unable to have children due to physical impediments (*involuntary childlessness*) (Bloom e Pebley 1982, Housecknecht 1983). It should be borne in mind, however, that even this apparently simple distinction is far from straightforward. Consider, for instance, women who continually put off having children to the point where this is no longer possible (*permanent postponers*). In this case, a behaviour that was originally voluntary might end up becoming involuntary due to the onset of problems of sterility. But the boundary between choice and constraint may also be hazy in many other cases as well. For instance, it is not clear whether the failure to enter into a union² is effectively a choice by women with little propensity for having a family or the result of an inability to find the “right partner”.

Some women express the intentions to remain childless relatively early in life, even in their teen age or before marriage (*early articulators*). Other women arrive at a childless decision through a series of postponements. (McAllister e Clark 1999, Housecknecht 1983). There are also some women who are unable to take any definitive decision with regard to motherhood (*waverer*): for them the notion of making decision seems simply not to apply (McAllister e Clark 1999).

We wonder whether the increase in the proportion of definitive childlessness over time is the result of the spread of voluntary childlessness, since that childbearing has become more a matter of preferences rather than obligations (Ryder 1979). From a rational-choice perspective, we may argue that costs of childlessness has reduced across time, while benefits are increasing.

² In the literature, women not in a union are generally considered to be “voluntarily childless”.

Many elements suggest a reduction in the costs of infertility, both for women and for couples. Consider, for instance, that childbearing is no more essential in the definition of female identity. Being childlessness does not imply any loss of status, but, on the contrary – it frequently helps to carve out a path for themselves in other areas. Similarly partnership, has assumed a central value in the life of the partners, irrespective of their parental role. Moreover, the diffusion of infertility has also determined a reduction of social sanctions and a greater social acceptance of the refusal to procreate. Pronatalist norms – which seem to sustain the biological and instinctive component of reproduction in all cultures – are weakening.

On the other hand, it should also be remembered that the profound structural changes that have occurred in society, such as increasing female education and women's greater presence on the job market, have undoubtedly increased the benefits of childlessness. First of all childless woman avoid two costs getting increasingly onerous: the cost of distraction from the labour market and the cost of combining paid and domestic work. Both are getting increasingly onerous, especially in Italy, where the job market is very rigid (Del Boca 1997), state assistance is still inadequate (Saraceno 1998) and the “gender contract” is still largely modeled on traditional patterns (McDonald 2000).

But we should also take into account that preferences have been changing and a group of women may particularly appreciate a “child free” way of life and dislike the parents' one. Emblematic evidence of this is the forming of groups and associations that support the choice of a life without children.

3. DATA SOURCE: FOCUS GROUPS

We carried out 9 Focus Groups, to which 59 married and employed women participated. Potentially suitable women were identified in the population register, according to the following criteria:

- Age: 34-45
- Marital status: married
- Currently employed

Initially contact was established by a recruitment letter which informed the potentially interviewees about the possibility of receiving a telephone interview from the University in the following weeks.

The screening took place through a quite short CATI interview where the aim of the general research, the request of participating to a sort of group of discussion, the institutions involved, the rewards for participation were carefully explained. The screening device included questions to exclude those women having sterility impairments or partnership instability. We were interested in selecting

women who in spite of being in couple and being fecund were still childless, while approaching the end of their reproductive life.

Towns	Focus Group Number	N. of Participants	Minimum age	Maximum age
Florence	1	10	37	45
	2	10	37	45
	3	8	36	45
Messina	1	5	36	37
Pesaro	1	8	34	35
	2	3	34	35
Udine	1	6	39	45
	2	4	36	45
Total	8	54	34	45

4. THE “CHILDFREE” IDENTITY

The childless women who participated in the Focus Groups seem to fit the definition of the *patchwork identity* particularly well (Balbo 1995). The majority of participants regarded work as being of fundamental importance, a primary source of gratification and satisfaction quite irrespective of what position is attained. They do not refer to work so much as a means of financial support or security, but as an essential means for affirming one’s independence and sense of personal development. Many participants defined themselves as “workaholics”, frequently doing more than one job and often considering work as the most interesting of hobbies.

“And then I’ve got other jobs, my hobby is doing other work” (Ilaria, 38 years old, FI-FGI)

I love my work. I work a lot, but because I like to (Dalia, 42 years old, FI-FGI)

Even though they place great emphasis on job fulfilment, many participants do not fit into the “career woman” stereotype, and are aware that their identity is expressed in a variety of areas. Childless women do not seem to consider the family, and in particular their relationship with their partner, to be marginal. Although they generally underline the importance of each partner having their own independence, they also stress the value of sharing things, getting on well and being in tune with

each other. A fair number of participants consider the relationship would not be so satisfactory if they had children, seen by many as a possible element of disruption in the relationship.

Free time is also described as an important aspect of the life of the interviewees; this often includes highly involving activities – cultural interests, travelling and sports – which are often something they have in common with their partner. Friendships are a further important element in the lives of some women.

In brief, we can affirm that the majority of childless women who participated in the Focus Groups lead very full and varied lives, and in some cases they could even be described as being “saturated” with commitments, relationships and hobbies. On the other hand, a minority of participants lead a much less frenetic life and are particularly keen on a quiet, inactive life: they describe themselves as “lazy” and want to spend time relaxing.

5. THE SOCIAL PRESSURE TO HAVE CHILDREN AND DEFENCE OF THE DECISION NOT TO

The women displayed a strong sense of relating and identifying with each other when they discovered, in the course of the meeting, that they were all childless, to the extent that they spontaneously began to exchange views about this choice. Not infrequently there was even a sense of genuine pride in belonging to the “category”; this was accompanied by a lively defence of their choices, probably accentuated by negative social judgements.

Some women still clearly feel a powerful social pressure to have children. They sense that they are being judged and have frequently been asked, after getting married: “So when are you going to have children then?” Most often these questions are posed by older people – family members, but sometimes also colleagues or neighbours. Some of the women expressed their irritation at such questions, not only when they make veiled reference to possible fertility problems, but also because they regard them as inappropriate interference, and want the right to decide if and when to have children entirely independently. Other women reacted in a more lively or ironic way to defend the style of life they so dearly enjoy.

Another source of irritation is the attitude that childless women have no right to talk about children and how to bring them up because they lack direct experience. They almost always feel excluded from the world of mothers, who always speak exclusively about children. Many reported the unpleasant experience of a gulf – sometimes insuperable – opening up between them and their closest friends when the latter had a child.

6. AWARENESS AND IRRATIONALITY IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS

The women who participated in the Focus Group mentioned a number of conditions that need fulfilling before deciding to have a child. The key word summing them all up is security: *personal*

security above all else, that is the psychological maturity required for parenthood; *emotional security*, namely a strong and well-established relationship with the partner; and *financial security*, including a house, an adequate salary and a secure job. These conditions, which were clearly listed during the group discussion, are all considered necessary though not sufficient, because in order to have a child, there must be some inner “spark” or “desire for motherhood”.

It is interesting to note that the following comment recurred in discussions between distinct groups of women in different cities: “Children? If you think about it, you won’t have them”. It seems then that, precisely where contraceptives are most widely available and used, and having a child therefore requires a conscious choice, this decision is seen as being determined more by instinct than by reason, by the “heart” rather than by the “head”; according to many women, it is “an irrational choice”, which contrasts, however, with the rationality required to stop using birth control measures.

There was agreement in the discussion groups that the hyper-rationalization of the choice to have a child (or simply the observation that it is now one of many possible choices) makes it harder to arrive at a final decision. The women were generally lucidly aware of the difficulties inherent in the “tough job of being a parent” and the heavy responsibility of bringing up a person who absorbs all the mother’s time and energy. They are convinced that if this awareness is not followed by a moment of “lucid madness”, one will end up not having children. Many women mentioned an almost excessive sense of responsibility, which increases with age – the more you wait, the more difficult it becomes to decide. Therefore, while economic theory entails that women should have a child when the estimated benefits outweigh the costs, these women feel that the decision to have a child is only made when this kind of logic is set to one side and there prevails what they call “maternal desire” and a “touch of recklessness” that outweighs highly rational doubts (Dalla Zuanna and Righi 1999). Other women referred to the biological clock making itself heard near the end of their fertile period.

On the other hand there are also women who have never posed the question in a serious way. They regard having a child as a possibility, but see it as being something for the future and not therefore a priority, even though they are not particularly young.

From what the participants said, it seems they are caught in what might be defined as the “security trap”. Young women have the perception – from a normative more than an economic point of view – that above all they must attain certain *security standards* deemed fundamental for being able to think in terms of having a child. During this period, they claim not even to have considered having children, devoting all their energy to professional self-fulfilment and the consolidation of their relationship with their partner. But when these standards have finally been achieved and the decision to have children might seem easy, the hard-earned *security* paradoxically becomes an obstacle to change. It is as if a situation which seemed at first to be fluid and unstable (and therefore inappropriate for thinking of having a child), once consolidated, closes in around you. Many women report being afraid of upsetting a fragile equilibrium attained with great sacrifice. A little at a time they therefore become accustomed to a certain *modus vivendi* and decide not to have children, both because they feel

entirely “fulfilled” and satisfied with their lives and because they do not want to run the risk that a child might definitively disrupt their personal lives and relationships with their partners (“and if we then get fed up with a child?”).

On the other hand, some women reported that postponement was followed by the attempt to have children, without, however, managing to conceive or to complete a pregnancy. It is as if the effect of the “delay syndrome” (Livi Bacci and Salvini 2000) were added to that of the “security trap”, the result being that the decision to have children is taken late in relation to biological limits. Many women end up as victims, so to speak, of the “illusion of eternal fertility”. In fact, some participants expressed regret that they had believed having children was something that could be planned entirely, without considering that delaying beyond a certain age might make it difficult to fulfil their fertility expectations. By contrast, some women said they had accepted without undue suffering the fact that they had thought about it too late.

6.1 Born To be childless?

The decision-making processes described above are very commonplace and reveal fairly tortuous and non-linear life paths. However, in contrast to these there is the resoluteness of those women who explicitly stated that a child was not part of their plans in life.

“(…) There are priorities, personally I think about all the other things rather than about having a child” (Anita, 37 years old, Messina, FG 1)

“I wanted to do something else, and a child didn’t fit in with it” (Beatrice, 43 years old, FI, FG2)

These women opted for an extremely free life without restraints, constrictions or time obligations, and with “plenty of scope for improvisation” that they obviously do not consider compatible with a child’s needs. Some said they do not like children, above all the idea of having someone entirely dependent on them, to whom they would have to sacrifice everything. They claimed to have no maternal instinct or desire to have children.

Only a very few women asserted that they did not want to have children because they had a pessimistic view of society and of the future. Some of these women are influenced by a negative childhood experience, and decide not to have children because they do not want others to go through the same experience.

A fair number of the women who were certain they did not want children consider the “job of being a mother” too much of a commitment and have high standards for parenthood; they even think that having a child is the result of “incredible egoism” when there is not enough time to look after them in the best way possible.

7. THE REPRESENTATION OF MOTHERHOOD: LOTS OF COSTS, SOME FEARS AND FEW BENEFITS

During the discussion, the childless women listed the innumerable “costs” of having children confidently, but were more hesitant and mixed up when asked about the benefits and pleasures of motherhood. They focused on the personal costs most, pointing out how their lives would change if they had a child. The first definite difficulty they mentioned is reconciling motherhood with work, which is very important for them but takes up a lot of time. Sometimes the difficulties they mentioned regard a lack of compatibility between working hours and looking after children, while others relate to worries about not being able to work with the same degree of “mental” concentration. Some women mentioned the negative experience of colleagues who were sidetracked into low-responsibility positions after they had children

Many women also referred to costs in broader terms. The “revolution” of having a child affects not only their work but impinges heavily on all the other areas of their lives. Children are described as “sponges”, completely absorbing the physical and mental energy of the mother and leaving no space for anything else.

“a child takes up all your time” (PS, FGI)

“you no longer have a calm state of mind to talk for a minute” (PS, FGI)

“Well, you know, when children are born they are.... like “sponges”, they don’t have anything, you have to give them...” (45 years old, UD, FGI)

Frequently, the birth of a child is not seen as the crowning moment of a union or a source of growth in the relationship, but as something causing conflict and disagreement; the presence of a child shatters the harmony between the partners, and some women went so far as to say that it is a “devastating experience”. Many women who have friends with children said they would never want to be in their shoes.

It should also be underlined that paradoxically childless women often have very high standards of motherhood; the discussion revealed an awareness that children have many needs and require the constant presence of parents, that raising children should not be delegated to others, and that children’s deepest needs have to be satisfied. In the meetings it was not rare to hear childless women criticizing parents, either because they impose a hectic pace of life on their children, or because they do not devote enough time to them, or again because they “park” them with grandparents or babysitters because they are not willing to make sacrifices for their wellbeing. They were also critical of overly anxious parents whose entire existence revolves around their children, who talk about nothing else and no longer have any other interests.

Some women also expressed fears about motherhood. Some of these relate to pregnancy and childbirth, others to the possibility that the child might not be healthy. However, there is also a further

set of rather more subtle fears, expressed by many of the women, namely the fear of not being able to cope and not managing to look after their child and give them what they need. This “sense of inadequacy” may stem from the fact that women feel increasingly unprepared for motherhood, also because in a society where children are increasingly “rare”, they are more unlikely to have had direct experience of looking after a nephew or niece or the children of friends. Another fear is that the partner might not be up to it and might duck out, and that they would end up with all the responsibility. Finally, there is also fear about the irreversibility of motherhood, a “decision that there is no going back on”.

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