Micro-level determinants of childlessness in Italy: a gender comparison across cohorts

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In the current demographic context characterized by low fertility, childlessness has become one of the most important reason explaining variations in the overall fertility in Europe. Since countries with similar levels of completed fertility can be characterized by different proportions of childless women, the factors influencing childlessness are somewhat different from those concerned with low fertility as a whole, but a comprehensive theory of childlessness is not well-developed yet and it is not clear how childlessness is now explained by factors, such as socio-economic status, and how it spreads across social classes.

In Italy the prevalence of definitive childlessness was less than 10% for the cohort born in the 40s and has doubled (21%) for the cohort born in 1970, according to the most recent estimates. Therefore Italy is an interesting context to study how the determinants of both temporary and permanent childlessness varies across birth cohorts. Traditional studies usually used to focus on women's characteristics, but the most recent ones have stressed the importance to take into account also men's features. Men's circumstances and attitudes indeed are likely to form an important part of the explanation for childlessness among women.

Under the assumption that childlessness can be determined by several multidimensional aspects this study is aimed at analyzing the change in the micro-level determinants of childlessness across birth cohorts, both among women and men, using data from the Multipurpose Italian survey, Family and Social Actors, carried out by the National Institute of Statistics every five years since 1998 to 2009. The focus will be on the characteristics of childless individuals (around 30, 40 and 50 years old), belonging to different birth cohorts (since 1948 to 1978). The factors (dimensions) we consider are related to individual background (demographic features), family background (family of origin features), social background (formal and informal support networks), family formation characteristics, socio-economic features (well-being and work-related features).

As childlessness is a phenomenon characterized by an inner complexity that need to be disentangled, a Structural Equation Models (SEM) approach will be used, in order to specify and assess causality networks among different childlessness-related dimensions and childlessness itself. The advantage of such a technique is that it makes possible, through a dynamic approach, to understand whether and to what extent each specified dimension and each hypothesized causal link contribute in determining the phenomenon under study.

Moreover, a multi-group SEM approach is used to analyze differences between men and women. We want to understand whether and to what extent childlessness pattern is gender-influenced. Specifically our aim is to test if the hypothesized childlessness model is able to explain and reproduce well the childlessness structure both for women and for men, to highlight and assess existing differences and to envisage a possible different diffusion mechanism by gender.