Relational Pathways to Postponed Childbearing in Cross-National Comparison

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Introduction

Age at childbearing is rising in most developed countries, creating a ‘Postponement Transition’ (Kohler, Billari, Ortega 2002, Mills et al. 2011). As women face reduced fecundity with age, women who delay childbearing may not be able to have children (Morgan & Taylor 2006, Schmidt et al. 2002). This involuntary childlessness is contributing to the rise in childlessness and to slowing population growth, and may have negative consequences for individuals and relationships (Mills et al. 2011). For women who delay childbearing and face infertility, assisted reproductive technologies offer assistance but are an expensive and stressful process (Greil et al 2010). During pregnancy and birth, older mothers are at higher risk of health complications (Mintziori et al 2013). These increased health costs are borne by the state, which is also affected by declining populations.

Relationships are a key condition for childbearing, as most people want to be in a suitable relationship before having children (Cooke, Mills & Lavender 2012, Hammarberg & Clarke 2005). The process of postponing parenthood to find the right partner may be compounded by relationship instability. Mills et al. (2011) speculate that “A delay in childbearing may also mean that women experience a relationship breakdown before having the opportunity to give birth and forming a new relationship takes time” (p.855). Very little research, however, has examined the relationship lifecourse of delayed childbearing (with the exception of Rybinska 2011 and Mynarska et al 2014).

The current study furthers the topic by a focus on how relationships contribute to delayed childbearing. It explores the relational lifecourse of women who have not had children by age 35, and examines how relationship histories and structures contribute to childbearing at an advanced age. This study also adds to this area by taking a holistic lifecourse approach, considering partner characteristics, and making cross-national comparisons.

Lifecourse Theory

Lifecourse theory (Elder et al. 2003) offers a compelling perspective for understanding the relationship antecedents of delayed childbearing. The current study concentrates on two core premises of lifecourse theory: Linked lives and embeddedness. Elder states that “lives are lived interdependently” (Elder et al. 2003, p. 13). These links can be between parents and children, siblings, partners, other family members or nonfamily. To date, holistic lifecourse analysis including linked lives has mainly focused on parents and children or on siblings (i.e. Fasang & Raab 2013; Liefbroer & Elzinga 2012). Partners have not yet been included in any lifecourse analyses of family formation, despite their clear relevance. One study which comes closest examines ex-partners’ trajectories post-separation (Pasteels & Mortelmans 2013). The current study, therefore, makes a unique contribution to lifecourse analysis of relationship trajectories by considering characteristics of partners in relationship trajectories.
Lifecourses are embedded in place and time, with the context in which they occur exerting a profound influence (Elder 1994; Elder et al. 2003). One aspect of this context is that societies differ in their norms and laws regarding family structures. Another is that welfare regimes (Esping-Andersen 1990) and marriage policy may also enable or restrict childbearing in relational context. For example, childbearing within marriage may be promoted by welfare-state policies that provide support to families rather than individuals and by laws distinguishing between childbearing in and out of marriage.

The pattern of childbearing within marriage appears stronger in Southern and Eastern Europe, and weaker in Northern and Western Europe, where cohabitation has become the norm (Perelli-Harris et al. 2012). An examination of relationship trajectories, not including childbearing, found that early marriage is the strongest in Eastern Europe, and later marriage in Southern Europe. Northern and Western Europe, by contrast, are typified by marriages preceded by cohabitation as well as by long-term cohabitations (the former group also includes the United States; Pirelli-Harris & Lyons-Amos 2013). Similarly, Elzinga and Liefbroer (2007) found that partnership and parenthood trajectories generally differed by region. They found that marriage characterised Eastern and Southern Europe, with early parenthood with marriage in Eastern European countries, and later parenthood with marriage in Southern European countries. Northern and Western Europe had lifecourses that featured later parenthood, both within cohabitation and within marriage following cohabitation (the latter pattern was also found in New Zealand).

Lifecourse theory also describes lives as multidimensional and consisting of multiple parallel processes. Some of the most important of these that have been examined together with relationship trajectories have been education, employment, and residence (i.e. Billari and Liefbroer 2010; Buchmann and Kriesi 2011; Pollock 2007; Gauthier et al. 2010). Education in particular has been implicated in delayed childbearing at a population level (Ní Bhrolcháin & Beujouan 2012), but at an individual level its effects are less direct. Other dimensions of life, in particular relationships, may have a closer effect on delays in childbearing (Morgan & Rackin 2010).

**Relational Context of Childbearing**

Relationships are one of the most important contexts for childbearing. Women at the end of their childbearing years who still wish for children state that the main reason they haven’t had children yet is because they lacked a suitable partner (Cooke et al. 2010; Settle & Brumley, 2014). As one woman states about being childless, “It happened naturally. I never met anybody to have children with. … So I did choose to remain childless without a partner” (Settle & Brumley, 2014, p.9). A woman who had children in her 40’s describes her lifecourse: “I was married before and it just didn’t work out, and I lived with somebody else and that didn’t work out … finally I met the right fellow so that’s when we started our family, and I was into my 40s by then” (Benzies et al. 2006, p.628).

Even when a partner is present, the two partners may not share intentions to have children (Miller, Severy, & Pasta 2010). One woman in her 30’s describes being ready several years before her partner was: “I was ready before he was. He was so nervous about his own. … We got the dog the year before to break us in” (Benzies et al. 2006, p.628). When partners do not agree, they are less likely to have a child than couples where both partners want a child, demonstrating the veto power of the partner who does not want a child (Berrington 2004, Bauer & Kneip 2013).
Partners’ differing parental statuses can also inform their intentions and childbearing. Forming relationships at a later age or with older partners may mean finding a partner who already has children. In some of these relationships the partners will not have children together, leaving one partner with stepchildren but no biological children (Thomson et al. 2002).

Relational lifecourses in the past several decades have been characterised by a pluralisation of family trajectories (Elzinga & Liefbroer 2007). A comparison across cohorts and countries reveals that later motherhood has become the most common feature of family trajectories among the youngest cohorts. Later motherhood preceded by cohabitation and marriage is preferred in Norway, Austria, the Netherlands, Finland, and New Zealand. Similarly, later motherhood preceded by marriage (but not cohabitation) is most common life course in Italy, Spain, and Portugal, and later motherhood within cohabitation in France, Estonia, and Sweden (Elzinga & Liefbroer 2007). In the United States, Barban (2013) examined the childbearing and relational trajectories of young women aged 15-30. She found that three of six groups are those with no children by age 30: those who stayed single until their late 20s and then cohabited, those who postponed marriage until their mid-to-late 20’s, and those who entered a cohabiting union early but did not marry.

Rybinska (2011) made a closer examination of the relationship antecedents of delayed childbearing of Polish women. Examining relationship status along with education and employment, they found distinctly different sequences for women who had children after age 35 compared with women who had children before age 30. The most striking difference is in relationship formation, with older mothers entering stable unions considerably later than younger mothers. In addition, older mothers experienced separation prior to first birth more frequently and for longer durations than did the younger mothers. These patterns provide a promising demonstration of how relational lifecourses can precede postponed childbearing.

If childbearing is delayed too long, some women face involuntary childlessness (te Velde & Pearson, 2002). Childlessness is increasing, and it is becoming evident that there are multiple paths to childlessness. Although some women make a firm decision early in their lives to remain childfree, most women come to childlessness over time. For childless women, their relationships are a key context defining their childbearing choices (McAllister & Clarke 1998; Tonkin 2014; Settle & Brumley 2014).

Mynarska and colleagues (2014) examined the relational, educational, and employment lifecourses of childless Polish and Italian women. Their study compared childless women 37-46 with women of the same age who had children (by birth or adoption) prior to age 37. Women with coresidential stepchildren are not included in the sample. In both countries childless women are distinguished by their relationship status, with most remaining single for the entire study period. Neither employment nor education differentiated as strongly between the older childless women and younger mothers as relationship status.

Why do some women who postpone parenthood go on to have children and others remain childless? Are they distinguished by their relational lifecourses? This question follows the work of Rybinska and Mynarska by examining the lifecourses of older women, and extends their work by directly comparing older mothers with their childless counterparts. As prior work found that relationships were the key distinguishing aspect of their lifecourses, the current study will focus on relational lifecourses to capture diversity in relationships. It is able to add to this research by including partner characteristics in a holistic lifecourse analysis, as well as by examining lifecourses across multiple country contexts.
Research Questions

1: What are the most common relationship trajectories of women who have not had children before age 35?

   1A: Do these trajectories differ by country context?

2: Can relationship trajectories distinguish between women with and without children?

   2A: Do these effects differ by country context?

Data

This analysis will use the Generations and Gender Study (www.ggs-i.org). Surveys were conducted in multiple countries and are a rich source of data on the context of childbearing. The current analysis uses 17 countries in the first wave of the survey. Women who had their first child between the ages of 35 and 49 are compared with women aged 35-39 who have not borne a child.

Sample

The GGS includes 30,545 women between the ages of 35 and 49. Of these, 1,449 had missing information for women’s or child’s date of birth, 27 had a misspecified age for self or child, 390 were missing information about a biological child, and 73 had adopted children and were thus not asked about date of adoption. Of women with no missing information about age at parenthood, 23,676 had biological children prior to age 35, 1,052 had biological children at age 35 or later, and 3,878 had neither biological nor adopted children. Women who bore their first child prior to age 35, women with missing and misspecified information on the age and date of birth of the children and self, women with missing information on the type of children, and women with adopted children only are not included in the sample. Women with foster or stepchildren are included as having no biological children. The final sample size consisted of 4,930 women aged 35-49 who either had their first child at age 35 or later or had no children.

Descriptive Results

The sample of women who had had no children prior to age 35 is detailed by country in Table 1. In all countries, a majority of these women remained without children. Overall, only about one-fifth of the women in all countries who reached age 35 without children had a child after age 35. This suggests that in many cases fertility postponed is fertility forgone. Only in Australia and Sweden did more than 30% of the women who were childless prior to age 35 have a child after age 35. In Italy and the Czech Republic, fewer than 10% of these women had a child after age 35.
Table 1: Women aged 35-39 who had no children prior to 35, frequencies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Child 35+</th>
<th>No child</th>
<th>n</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>201</td>
<td>291</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Austria</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>248</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Belgium</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>170</td>
<td>227</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bulgaria</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>180</td>
<td>209</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Czech Republic</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>154</td>
<td>171</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estonia</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>France</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>321</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Georgia</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>215</td>
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<tr>
<td>Germany</td>
<td>103</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hungary</td>
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<td>155</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Italy</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>411</td>
<td>415</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lithuania</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Netherlands</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>314</td>
<td>430</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norway</td>
<td>117</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>417</td>
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<tr>
<td>Poland</td>
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<td>249</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Romania</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>160</td>
<td>181</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Russia</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sweden</td>
<td>113</td>
<td>239</td>
<td>352</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>1,052</strong></td>
<td><strong>3,878</strong></td>
<td><strong>4,930</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data: Generations and Gender, Wave 1

Analysis

Sequence analysis (Abbott 1995, Abbot & Tsay 2000) will be used to identify the most frequently occurring relationship trajectories. Sequence analysis and latent class analysis are the most commonly-used methods to holistically analyse life course trajectories. Comparisons examining their relative strengths and limitations have demonstrated that each adequately identifies life course trajectories (Barban & Billari 2010, Pirelli-Harris et al. 2012). In this study, sequences will identify relationship status as well as partner’s parental status. The relationship sequences will be used in logistic regression models to distinguish women with and without children, and a final step will use multilevel modelling to include country effects.
References


