

How Late do Women Wait? Expectations of Parenthood and Childlessness across the Reproductive Life Course.

Steven Martin

New York University

Kelly Musick

Cornell University

#### ABSTRACT

We use longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979–2008 to measure women’s fertility expectations across the reproductive life course. We also develop models of what the trajectories of fertility expectations for childless women should look like, if childlessness is the result of delaying childbearing based on “good” and “bad” information, respectively, about age and infertility. Our main methodological advance is to develop indirect techniques to distinguish women who “try” for a child at a given age (or are sexually active with imperfect enough contraceptive use that a birth would be expected) from women who switch to expecting childlessness without ever having actively attempted to get pregnant. We find that prolonged expectation of parenthood among ultimately childless women is the exception rather than the rule; most childless women shift their fertility expectations to expectations of childlessness by their early thirties, even if they never try for a baby.

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Women in the United States are postponing childbearing to later ages than ever before, but many women who initially expect to become mothers ultimately remain childless. Among women in the United States who remain permanently childless, an estimated 5 in 6 had expected children at age 24 (Morgan and Rackin 2010). In response to statistics like these, some researchers have argued that most childless women are women who waited too long to try for a baby, and if they had been better educated about age-related infertility, they would have been less likely to postpone childbearing and more likely to avoid involuntary childlessness. In other words, the argument goes, much of childlessness is the result of women acting on bad information.

This argument is supported by two lines of social research. First, young adult women have been shown to prospectively underestimate the decline of fertility with age and hence overestimate their chances of motherhood should they delay (Virtala et al. 2011). Second, older adult women who are involuntarily childless often retrospectively report having underestimated both the decline of their fertility and the decline in their chances of marrying (Hewlett 2002).

However, there are gaps in both the prospective and retrospective lines of research supporting the “bad information” theory of childlessness. From the prospective studies, we do not yet know how the expectations of fertility young women have in their early to mid-20s change across their reproductive life course; do they gradually become more knowledgeable about biological and social fertility clocks, or do they simply assume they can have children up to the point where they find out they are already infertile? In turn, most retrospective studies of involuntary childlessness have a known difficulty with representativeness, being drawn mostly from among women who strongly desired to have a child despite having postponed childbearing, and from populations of women (namely highly

educated career women) whose experience of involuntary childlessness might not be representative of the population as a whole.

In this paper we use longitudinal data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) 1979 – 2008 to measure women’s fertility expectations across the reproductive life course. We also develop models of what the trajectories of fertility expectations for childless women should look like, if childlessness is the result of delaying childbearing based on “good” and “bad” information, respectively, about age and fertility. We also define a third candidate model, which postulates that preferences for childbearing and childlessness can vary across the reproductive life course.

The important methodological advances of our study are twofold. First, by following fertility expectations at two year intervals across the reproductive life course, we are able to determine not only the ages at which a transition occurs from expected parenthood to expected childlessness, but the stability and permanence of such a transition after it occurs. Our second methodological advance is to develop indirect techniques to make the critical distinction between women who “try” for a child at a given age (or are sexually active with imperfect enough contraceptive use that a birth would be expected), and women who switch to expecting childlessness without ever having actively attempted to get pregnant.

Our results focus on the age at which women who ultimately remain childless switch their expectations from parenthood to childlessness. We find that a few ultimately childless women persist in expecting children longer than is biologically or socially plausible, continuing to expect children into their late 30s or early 40s before switching to a permanent expectation of childlessness. Such a pattern is most evident among white college graduate women. In addition, the samples of nonhispanic black women and Hispanic women with less than a college degree indicate that many persist in expecting children to relatively late ages. Cases where women expect a first birth past age 40, even though such a

birth is both biologically and socially unlikely, constitute supporting but not conclusive evidence for the “bad information” interpretation of childlessness.

Over the whole population of women, however, we find that prolonged expectation of parenthood among ultimately childless women is the exception rather than the rule. We find that most childless women shift their fertility expectations to expectations of childlessness by their early thirties. This pattern holds when we indirectly factor out women who “discover” their own infertility by trying for a baby as early adults, and it also holds when we use the most stringent definition of the transition to the expectation of childlessness, counting only the final, permanent shift to an expectation of childlessness. We conclude that most women who remain childless do not do so as a result of “bad” information about age-related infecundability, but instead as a result of accurate information about their biological clocks and prospects for future marriage, perhaps combined with shifting preferences about the relative desirability of parenthood and childlessness over the life course. We close with a discussion of why unexpected childless still occurs when young adult women plan their childbearing based on accurate information.

SOME PRELIMINARY RESULTS

Table 1: Childlessness among U.S. Women at Age 43-44, by Age at Which the Expectation of Childlessness Becomes Permanent.

Age at Which Expectation of Childlessness Becomes Permanent	All U.S. Women	Nonhispanic White, 4-year College Degree at Age 25	Nonhispanic White, No 4-Year Degree at Age 25	Nonhispanic Black, 4-year College Degree at Age 25	Nonhispanic Black, No 4-Year Degree at Age 25
24 or younger	2.2 %	3.4 %	2.3 %	0.4 %	0.8 %
25 to 29	3.0	2.9	3.6	0.4	1.4
30 to 34	4.2	5.0	4.6	4.0	2.8
35 to 39	3.3	6.4	2.2	13.0	3.1
40 or older	3.6	5.4	2.9	14.1	3.9
Total % Childless	16.2 %	23.2 %	15.1 %	31.9 %	11.9 %

Source: NLSY 1979-2008.

Table 2; Childlessness among U.S. Women at Age 43-44, by Age at Which the Expectation of Childlessness Becomes Permanent, and by Childlessness By Known Infertility (Women who “try” for a birth) Versus Childlessness By Social Circumstance (Women who do not “try” for a birth).

Age at Which Expectation of Childlessness Becomes Permanent	All U.S. Women	By Known Infertility	By Social Circumstance
24 or younger	2.2 %	1.6 %	0.6 %
25 to 29	3.0	1.6	1.4
30 to 34	4.2	1.8	2.4
35 to 39	3.3	1.6	1.7
40 or older	3.6	1.3	2.3
Total % Childless	16.2 %	7.8 %	8.5 %

Source: NLSY 1979 – 2008.

Notes: Estimates of childlessness by “Known Infertility” and by “Social Circumstance” are derived from the age-related infertility schedules of Menken (1985) and observed age distributions of first births in the NLSY. Infertility schedules are then averaged across a range of possible age-specific infertility levels (from 40% lower than Menken to 10% higher than Menken) and delays in acknowledging expected infertility among women “trying” for a birth (Expectation shifts lagged from 0 to 5 years later than typical waiting time for a first birth).

Details forthcoming in the full paper.