

An analysis of Italian couples' fertility decision-making process: second birth intentions and realizations

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Abstract (up to 300 words)

The aim of this article is to analyse second births fertility intentions and their correspondence to subsequent reproductive behaviour.

The adoption of a couple's perspective allows us to treat in a unitary framework the concordant or discordant partners' fertility intentions and its impact on effective behaviour.

The household-level micro-data from the first and (as long as they are available) the second wave of the "Family and Social Subjects" survey are used in the analysis. The surveys were carried out by the Italian National Statistical Office in 2003 and in 2006.

Since Italy is a country where childcare services are scarce and the main burden of childrearing lies on women, our main assumption is that Italian couples are particularly exposed to a conflict concerning a second birth if the woman is empowered, i.e., if she works, or she has a higher level of education as compared to the partner, or if the woman is unsatisfied about the gender division of family tasks.

The analysis is based on multinomial logit models where the response variable has four categories denoting a couple's concordant intention, either positive or negative, or a couple's discordant intention, where either the female or the male partner may or may not intend to become parents for the second time.

We found that (preliminary results) the level of educational attainment of the female partner is not necessarily an obstacle for the second childbearing. However, a lack of agreement in the reproductive decision-making process is likely to occur in the Italian couples where the role of the woman is less traditional. In particular, full-time working women are more likely to be in disagreement with their partners in the decisions concerning having a second child, while the satisfaction with the division of every-day life tasks appear not to be relevant in shaping fertility intentions.

1. Introduction

Over the past decades the process of family formation has dramatically changed in Europe. Even though similar trends have been observed across Europe there are still important differences between countries. In comparison to Western European countries Italy shows the latest-late transition to adulthood and persistent low levels of fertility. Moreover, this country is characterized by the predominance of traditional gender roles and a very limited social welfare system that favours an overcautious attitude towards risk and family responsibilities.

This study aims to analyse the process of family formation in Italy in a multi-process framework. First, we analyse second birth fertility intentions conditioning on the circumstance that couples have already had their first child. Second, we examine the link between second birth fertility intentions and subsequent reproductive behaviour by using the two waves of data.

2. Background

In a previous analysis we studied the Italian couple's childbearing intentions by looking at only those couples who were childless at the time of the interview (Rosina, Testa 2009). The transition from the first to the second child is a very important phase in the individuals' reproductive career, so in the current paper we concentrate on the arrival of the first child and the intention to have a second child. Moreover, the current low Italian levels of fertility are mainly due to the increased proportion of small families (i.e., one-child families, and decreased proportion of larger families), so it is particular interesting to study couple's fertility intentions after the birth of the first child. Additionally, such analysis aims at understanding the factors that explain the existing gap between desired family size (slightly over 2 children) and effective behaviour (CTFR below 1,5).

3. Data and Methods

In our analysis we use household-level micro-data provided by the International Generation and Gender Program study and in particular by the first wave of "Family and Social Subjects" survey carried out by the Italian National Statistical Office in 2003. A second wave of this survey was carried out at the end of 2006. Both waves provide information on fertility intentions of both partners and the second wave registers all the births occurred in the inter-survey period.

We adopt a *couple* approach. Actually, even if the importance of the partner's reproductive intentions has been recently recognized in literature, only few studies have provided in-depth analyses of the fertility plans of both partners (Thomson 1997). Precisely, in the economic literature, a couple's perspective started to be adopted as women gained a stronger authority in

decision-making within the household. As a consequence, the Becker's unitary models developed in the 1960s based on as a single decision-making agent were replaced in the early 1980s by non-unitary models relied on cooperative game theory with the involvement of more agents with distinct preferences in determining family consumption (Lundberg and Pollak 1996).

The fertility intentions questions used in our analysis are addressed as follow: "Do you intend to have a child in the next three years?".

The investigation on the intention to have a second child is based on a multinomial logit model where the response variable has four categories denoting a couple's concordant intention, either positive or negative, or a couple's discordant intention, where either the female or the male partner may or may not intend to become a parent for the second time. The response options were: 'Surely not', 'Probably not', 'Probably yes', and 'Surely yes'. For the sake of simplicity in the multivariate analysis we grouped together the two categories 'Surely not' and 'Probably not' and the two categories 'Probably yes' and 'Surely yes'.

The main explanatory variables included in the analysis are: females and male employment status, female and male education, female and male mass attendance and female satisfaction with the division of domestic work. Other control variables related to the individual characteristics of the respondents are: age of the respondents, type of marriage (if it was religious or civil), area of residence, and duration time from the date of the birth of the first child.

Our main hypothesis (see also Cavalli and Rosina 2009) is that in Italy couples' intentions to have a child are particularly exposed to a partners' conflict if the woman works (actually, a job is increasingly seen as a necessity not only for economic reasons, but also for the independence and the personal realization of the woman) and if she has a higher level of education as compared to that the partner. Moreover, it is supposed that some levels of conflict emerge when women are unsatisfied with the gender division of child caring responsibilities and other family duties.

4. First results

Our preliminary results show that the level of educational attainment of the female partner is not necessarily an obstacle for the transition to a second child. However, couples where woman holds a University degree have a more prudent attitude toward the possibility to become parents for the second time and this can be the result of a societal gender structure in Italy that has not successfully reduced fertility costs for more educated women. More importantly, the employment status of the female partner is an important element shaping the second child intentions. Indeed, working-women tend to disagree with their partner more often as compared to housewife women, if the partner wants to become parent again. Additionally, focusing on females' employment's strategies, part-time working women with a positive intention for a second child tend to be contrasted less often by the male partner.

In a second model, as soon as the data from the second wave will be available, we will analyse the relationship between couple's concordant/discordant intentions and subsequent behaviour. Specifically, we want to understand to what extent and under what conditions couples' concordant and discordant fertility intentions are translated into consistent childbearing behaviour.

5. Concluding remarks

Recently, the importance of the partner's reproductive intentions has been recognized in literature, even if few studies have provided in-depth analyses of fertility plans of both partners (Thomson 1997) and fertility research has continued to be primarily based on the views of women. Thanks to the use of new and recent data gathered with the Multipurpose Household Survey on "Family and Social Subjects", in this paper we had the possibility to analyze the household as a survey unit by using information on both members of the couple. Moreover, thanks to the results obtained in the analysis of the relationship between fertility intentions and subsequent behaviours we could be able to find out whether the negative effect of female labour force participation on second birth intentions and realizations may be counterbalanced by more symmetric gender roles within the couples and by adequate policy measures aimed at facilitating the reconciliation between family and working life.

Key-Words: Fertility decision-making process, Fertility intentions, Bargaining power approach, Fertility Behaviour, Multiprocess model.

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