Family composition and remarriage in Alghero (1866-1925)

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Introduction

The historical phenomenon of second marriages in Italy is not well known. At an aggregate level there are numerous works and references on this subject (Livi Bacci 1981), but at the micro-analytical level few cases have been studied in depth. To the scarce availability of sources for this kind of analysis must be added the technical difficulties that often represent an insurmountable obstacle to this type of studies. (Breschi et al. 2008-2009; Manfredini, Breschi 2006). In order to add a contribution to this complex and fairly unknown problem, we have thought of analysing with micro-level data the population of Alghero, a well-known small town in the North of Sardinia. More specifically, we have studied the marriages cohorts from 1866 to 1885. Using a selected subset of widows/widowers from such marriages, whose destiny we have been able to trace, we will try to work out the processes that brought these individuals to face, or avoid, a second marriage. More particularly we will throw light on those components that rarely emerge from non-normative studies. In order to emphasize the essential components of the remarriage phenomenon, we have decided to analyse only those people who became widows/widowers before the age of 55. The effect of this choice is advantageous as it allows us to reduce the background effect generated by unions in the later part of life and to emphasize the most interesting aspects of the phenomenon. In particular, attention will be given to the conditions generated by the first union: number of living children, age at the time of widowhood and number of years spent in widowhood. As already

pointed out by other scholars (Breschi et al. 2008-2009; Kurosu 2007; Van Poppel 1995-1998), these factors might strongly affect the chances of remarriage.

Descriptive analysis

The primary source of this study is represented by the marriage registers of the local Town Hall from 1866 to 1925 and, to make the study complete, the marriage registers of the Alghero parish for the same period of time. At the time, the territorial borders of Town Hall and Parish coincided perfectly, so that the population under the two kinds of administration was more or less the same. In spite of this, the civil and religious registers reveal differences which are due essentially to the different times in which the marriages were celebrated in the two sites. The same marriage could be celebrated in the same day in Church and in the Town Hall, but there could also be a substantial lapse of time between the two ceremonies; this temporal difference could be a long one, so much so that the death of one of the spouses could prevent the celebration of one of them. The result of this complex phenomenon results in marriages present only in the civil register or only in the religious one, while in the great majority of cases there is a double registration of the marriage for the same couple, even though at different times. Because of the complexity of the phenomenon (Breschi et al. 2010), in this work we have considered the marriage date to be the first one, whether the marriage took place in Church alone, in the Town Hall alone, or from a double registration in Church and Town Hall. As well as the wedding registers we took into consideration the death and birth registers of the Alghero Municipality. Finally, important information on the mobility of the population was taken from the 1921 Italian population census relating to the Alghero Municipality, as well as from a nominative list similar to a register. As well as using classic demographic sources, we have reconstructed biological families with the well-known Henry method (Henry, Blum 1988). From the whole of our sources we obtained a dataset of individual biographies and for each individual who married between 1866 and 1885 we catalogued the following information:

sex, date of first marriage, age at first marriage, death of spouse, second marriage, occupation, level of education, children from first marriage, permanence on the territory, death.
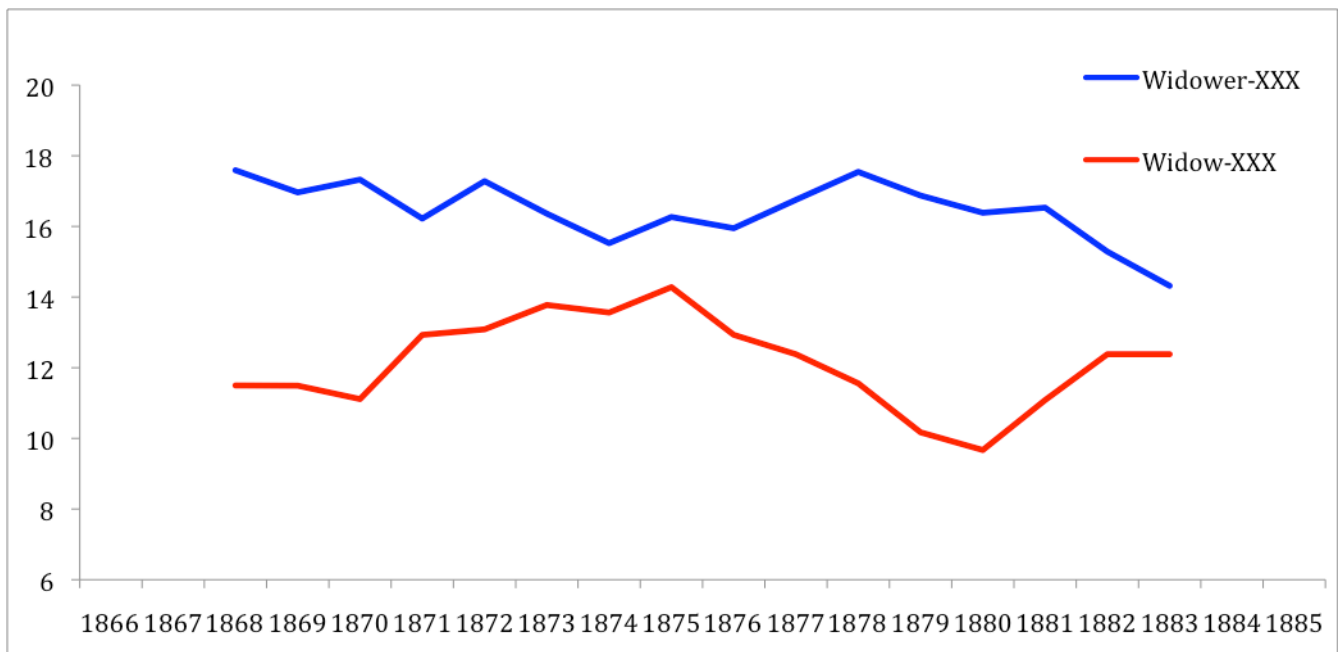
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Between 1866 and 1885, 1524 marriages were celebrated in Alghero; of these, 239 took place only in Church while 128 where celebrated only in the Town Hall. Out of the total of marriages celebrated in Alghero, almost 80% involved people marrying for the first time, while the remaining 20% involved at least a widow or widower, with about 9% of them involving a widower with a woman marrying for the first time and 5% a widow with a man marrying for the first time. In the remaining 8% of marriages both spouses were a widow and a widower, Table 1.

Tab. 1 Type of marriages. Alghero 1866-1885

Type of marriages	N	%
Bachelor/Spinster	1206	79.1
Widower/Spinster	131	8.6
Bachelor/Widows	72	4.7
Widower/Widow	115	7.5
Total	1524	100
Total with widower	246	16.1
Total with widow	187	12.3
Total with widow(er)	318	20.8

Altogether the percentage of marriages including at least a widower or a widow is around 20.8. The gap between widows and widowers is not as wide as that in other Italian areas at the time (Breschi et at. 2009), so much so that in some periods a balance is almost reached and the percentage of marriages with a widow almost equals that with a widower as, for example, in the years from 1871 to 1876, Figure 1.

Fig. 1 Proportion of remarriages. Alghero (1866-1885)

This is data that contrasts significantly with the national average situation, especially regarding the marriages of widowers with widows: in the same period in Italy the percentage is around 3.6, while in Alghero it is practically double that (ISTAT[1]). Ages at first marriage for the years 1866 to 1885 are given in Table 2 and they show a gap of more than 5 years between groom and bride.

Tab. 2 Age at first marriage. Alghero 1866-1885

	N	Std. Dev.	Age at marriage
Groom	1259	5.7	27.2
Bride	1304	5.7	21.9
Widower	239	10.6	40.3
Widow	182	9.8	37.0

Note: marriage acts not reporting information on age (26 groom, 38 bride) were excluded

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[1] National Institute of Statistics

The nuptiality pattern of Alghero is very close to the island average, characterised by low levels of definitive unmarried state (Rettaroli 1992; Cocchi et al. 1996). The high remarriage frequency between widowed people can be attributed to circumstances of a strictly demographic nature:

1) High presence of widows because of the difference in age at the first marriage;
2) Limited amount of unmarried men and women;
3) High geographic endogamy;

In other words, the widower and/or widow who wanted to remarry were necessarily "forced" to find a new spouse within the relatively large group of widowers/widows.

Remarriage, micro-analytical approach

Thanks to *individual-level data* we can follow for at least 40 years the destiny of individuals who married between 1866 and 1885. Among them we can identify 928 widowed people (367 males and 561 females). The first selection made to obtain our study subset is based on the age of widowhood, excluding, for reasons already referred to, widowers and widows older than 55. From this first selection we obtain 666 widowers who can be kept under observation for at least 10 years; then we have excluded the individuals who died within 10 years without entering a second marriage in that time are excluded from the analysis. Thanks to this further selection we obtain 612 individuals. The last filter concerns the destiny of the single widowers and widows; we sought to minimize the effect of migrations by taking into account only those individuals whose destiny we can establish, namely the individuals remaining in the population during the period analyzed.

After this last selection, a total number of 485 individuals is retained for our micro-analytical analysis, more precisely 173 widowers and 285 widows. The stages of this selection are shown in Table 3.

Tab. 3 Selection of window(er)s. Alghero 1866-1885

Selection	Widowers	Widows	Total
	N	N	N
All Widow(er)s	367	561	928
≤55 y	239	427	666
Observed for at least 10 years	212	400	612
Widow(er)s destiny known	**173**	**285**	**458**

The 458 widowers and widows thus selected were followed for the first 10 years of widowhood and for each individual we have collected several information representing the covariates of the risk models based on the *event history analysis* techniques.

In the model the covariate variables of a demographic kind are expressed as continuous variables. In the case of each single widower, in each year in which he was exposed to the risk of remarrying, we also estimated the presence or absence of children from the previous marriage. More precisely, the presence of at least one living child under 12 and the presence of living children older than 12. The information about the education level of the widowers/widows was derived from the presence of the signature on the marriage register. For some individuals this information was missing because the signature was not compulsory according to the religious authority.

We have classified according to a social gradient the widowers' occupation on the basis of the information reported in their first marriage certificates, while in the case of widows we have utilized the corresponding husbands' occupation contained in their first marriage certificates.

Results and discussion

Table 4 suggests important considerations; the age of widowhood seems to influence widows more than widowers. Widows show a significant diminution of the risk of remarrying with every passing year, while this does not seem to happen for men, even though the values are just above the statistical significance. As far as the length of widowhood is concerned, we see the opposite situation from the one just mentioned: for the widowers each year represents a reduction of the risk of remarrying, while for women this does not seem to happen. Results relative to family composition and the presence of living children from the previous marriage are rather decisive and clear. In the case of widowers, the presence of children younger than 12 or even older than 12 does not influence the risk of contracting a new marriage, while for the widows this seems to be an essential factor. The presence of children younger than 12, but even older than this age, strongly affects the widows' risk of marrying again. In comparison to the reference category (childless widows), the presence of children implies a reduction of risk of 50%, when they are younger than 12 and of 90% when they are older.

The level of education for both widows and widowers doesn't affect the probability of a second marriage and does not seem a determinant of second marriages in Alghero. In the third category, identified as "unknown" (8% of the cases), there is a reduction of the risk with high statistical significance only for widowers. Rather than a result this is a probable consequence of those marriages which were celebrated only in Church and that could not be legalized in the Town Hall because of premature death. Occupation does not show up significant differences for the widowers, whereas for the widows there is a reduction of the risk in comparison to the reference category of those women who had been first married to fishermen.

In order to better interpret the differences between widowers and widows, we chose to elaborate a competitive risks model with fewer covariates, Table 5. The intention was not only that of evaluating the risk of contracting a new marriage, but also of looking into the marital status of the future groom/bride of the widower/widow being observed. We found few differences in comparison with the previous model as far as the first two covariates are concerned, while there were interesting results concerning the children from the previous marriage. As in the previous model, widowers are not influenced by the presence of living children from the first marriage but now this is true also in case of widows remarrying with men previously unmarried. If the second marriage is with a widower, there is still a strong

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reduction of the risk of contracting a new marriage with, basically, a return to the previous model. The widow seems to avoid or in any case to have trouble in contracting a new marriage with a widower when she has children from a previous union, whether they are very young or older.

In conclusion we can say that is crucial the role of demographic variables, that is, the higher the age of widowhood and the more the risk of remarrying diminishes, but also the time spent in that condition seems decisive. Other considerations appear quite new, for example the lack of influence of the presence of children, both younger and older, on a second marriage of widowers, when normally one would think that this factor would serve as a stimulus for a new marriage (Bideu, Perrenoud 1981) and, on the other hand, its significant effect on widows. What we found interesting, however, was investigating the marital status of the partner in the second marriage. From this analysis it emerged that children represent an obstacle when the widow contracts a second marriage with a widower. A suggestion for interpreting such phenomenon comes from the land registry of Fonni, a municipality that is similar in some ways to Alghero. In this document it emerges that the widows belong almost always to the medium-high income strata, in contrast to unmarried and married women. Also, local oral testimonies confirm that the widow inherited a third of the husband's property if childless, otherwise she inherited a portion equal to that of the children (Murru Corriga 1990, 243). Therefore a widower looking for a new union would find in a childless widow a very good opportunity: a woman without children and in economic conditions much more advantageous than those of widows with children, especially in the case of adult children entitled to the inheritance left by their father. In the case of a widow married to a previously unmarried man this phenomenon loses in importance, so much so that statistically it appears as the least frequent combination, only 34 cases.

As for the other variables taken into consideration, the level of education of the Alghero widowers and widows did not represent a factor influencing the remarriage phenomenon, while as far as the other information analysed some differences emerge which are difficult to interpret at this analysis stage. A more in-depth knowledge of the local marriage market- to this respect we have at our disposal only some basic information (Rettaroli 1992)- as well as a more thoroughly understanding of the socio-economic context would undoubtedly bring much more stable and reliable results.

Tab. 4 Risk model for the determinants of remarriage. Alghero 1866-1885

Covariates	Widowers			Widows		
	Odds	*P>|z|*	*%*	*Odds*	*P>|z|*	*%*
Age	0.976	0.074	Mean 39.03	**0.937**	0.000	Mean 38.41
Duration of widowhood	**0.877**	0.002	Mean 3.32	0.960	0.292	Mean 4.02
Children from previous marriage (ref. no children)	1.000		6.2	1.000		8.1
At least one child <12 years	0.806	0.558	78.9	**0.437**	0.004	64.0
Only children 12+ years	0.394	0.120	14.9	**0.095**	0.000	27.9
Level of education (ref. no signature)	1.000		54.3	1.000		71.6
Signature	0.817	0.404	36.9	0.691	0.213	24.0
Unknow	**0.225**	0.014	8.8	0.986	0.977	4.4
Occupation. (ref. Farmer)	1.000		58.9	1.000		70.9
Sailor- Fisherman	1.272	0.430	12.2	**0.366**	0.013	12.1
Artisan-Upper class	0.959	0.873	28.9	0.504	0.063	17.0
Log likelihood	-334.242			-376.062		
Person-years	906			2229		
Events	120			105		

Note: In bold coefficients statistically significant ($p \leq 0.05$)

Tab. 5 Competitive risk model for the determinants of remarriage. Alghero 1866-1885

Covariates	Widowers married with		Widows married with	
	Unmarried	*Widows*	*Unmarried*	*Widowers*
Age	**0.930**	1.015	**0.925**	**0.948**
Duration of widowhood	**0.867**	**0.862**	0.936	0.966
Children from previous marriage (ref. no children)	1.000	1.000	1.000	1.000
At least one child <12 years	0.753	1.022	1.075	**0.377**
Only children 12+ years	0.811	0.314	0.270	**0.067**
Log likelihood	-191.725	-218.749	-159.564	-258.801
Person-years	765	850	2158	2195
Events	56	64	34	71

Note: In bold coefficients statistically significant (p ≤ 0.05)

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