

Sexual behaviour in Italy

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Introduction

Over the last thirty years many researches on sexuality have been carried out all around the Western World which have enormously enriched our knowledge (some reviews of these studies are presented by Smith 1998; Baumeister and Tice, 2001, Bozon and Bajos, 2008). In Italy the last nationwide representative survey was carried out in 1977 (Fabris and Davis, 1978). The researches for Italy developed during the last thirty years do not allow reliable comparisons for a great enough number of generations and often lack a statistically valid sampling.

Only an extensive, large-scale study, with rigorous sample methodology, involving a large number of generations can enable the reconstruction of the history of the Italian *sexual changes* and provide an exact picture of values and sexual behaviour of the Italian population.

In this paper, for the first time, we present some results of ISI 2006 (Italian Sexual Survey – year 2006), a survey that has all these characteristics. The complete results are going to be published in an Italian book in Spring 2010 (Barbagli et al., 2010).

ISI 2006 has been carried out on three different sample groups aged 18-69. The first sample of 3,058 subjects is a nationwide representative sample of Italians, interviewed in Fall 2006 using a structured questionnaire divided into two parts. The first one – given face-to-face by an interviewer – concerned the structural variables, and values and norms regarding sexuality. The questions of the second part had to be self-filled in by the interviewee. They concerned the sexual biography and behaviours, and sexual orientation. The second nationwide representative sample of Italians (4,341 subjects) was interviewed in Spring 2007 in a wider survey, that included a short series of self-filled questions on sexual orientation and behaviour. Combining these two independent samples we achieve a overall sample of 7,349 people, sufficient to analyze also the sexual attitudes and behaviour that are less common in the general population. The third sample of 150 people have undergone a long in-depth interview during 2006: it is a collection of “sexual life-histories”, audiotape-recorded and then transcribed, lasting 2 hours each on the average, taking place on more than one occasion.

In this paper, some general quantitative results will be presented, mainly concerning the sexual debut, the number of partner, and some sexual practices, comparing cohorts born in 1937-1988, and considering some differential characteristics (education, place of residence, church attendance). In this short abstract, we present some data on sexual debut and number of partners.

Results

In table 1 some general results on sexual debut are shown, whereas table 2 concerns correlates of age at first intercourse, using an event history regression model, that allow to take into account censored cases.

In the first half of the 1900s, in Italy, and in the other southern European countries, the majority of men had their first sexual experience before the age of 18/19, and often with prostitutes or anyway not in a stable couple relationship. In contrast, in the vast majority of cases women had their first sexual experience with their future husbands, and in many cases right after marriage or a few months before. This marked difference between men and women decreased notably for those born in the 1940s and became much lower for those born in the 1970s: women born in the 1970s had their first sexual experience at a similar age, if not younger than that of men. The mean age for men has stayed around 18 years old (more or less the same as their fathers and grandfathers), while that of women has fallen from 22-23 to 19-18 years old.

ISI 2006 confirms also the outcomes of recent studies, that have shown a further decrease in age at first intercourse for young people born in the 1980s (Dalla Zuanna and Crisafulli 2004, but also Curie et al., 2004). Table 1 (last two columns) shows also the increase – for the last cohorts – of people having early first sex, although these levels are much lower than the ones of other countries (e.g. USA, UK, Australia and

Germany – Billari et al., 2007). Moreover, the majority of young Italians are orientated towards more sexual freedom, with: (1) a considerable permissiveness concerning virginity, pre-marital sex, sexual promiscuity; (2) an alignment towards equality in judgement towards masculine and feminine behaviour; (3) a detachment from the restrictive norms of Catholic Church on sexual behaviour. Only a minority, even if a relevant one, still takes a different position in which traditional orientations are kept, although some taboos are overcome, (Caltabiano et al., 2005; 2006).

The most relevant covariates of age at first intercourse in Italy are cohort (only for females), religion and place of residence, whereas education plays a more controversial role (table 2).

In table 3 the number of sexual partners in life course by gender and cohort is shown. The number of partners is lower for women than for men, and women having more than three sexual partners in life are a small minority. However, this gap reduces in younger cohorts as males and females behaviours become more and more similar.

Table 1. The sexual debut of Italian cohorts (1937-89)

Cohort	Median age at first intercourse			% who had sex before age 16	
	Males	Females	Difference F – M	Males	Females
1937-46	18.5	21.0	2.5	14.1	4.5
1947-56	17.8	20.1	2.3	19.3	6.1
1957-66	17.8	18.9	1.1	19.3	12.0
1967-76	17.9	19.1	1.2	17.1	13.2
1977-82	17.5	18.5	1.0	23.4	15.4
1983-89	17.4	18.5	1.1	24.0	18.2

Table 2. Event History model for age at first intercourse

Hazard of first intercourse	Males	Females
Urban dimension:		
< 10.000	1.00	1.00
10.000-100.000	0.98	0.97
> 100.000	1.01	1.08 **
Education:		
No education or primary school	1.00	1.00
Junior High School	1.13 **	1.12 **
High School Diploma	1.03	1.07
University degree	0.88 *	0.93
Church attendance:		
Irregular or none	1.00	1.00
Regular	0.75 ***	0.77 ***

Also cohort and macro-area are included

* 0,10<p<0,05 ** 0,05<p<0,01 *** p<0,01

Table 3. Number of sexual partners. Row %.

Cohort	0	1	2-3	4-5	6-10	11-20	21+	Total
Males								
1937-1946	2	24	27	18	11	8	10	100
1947-1956	1	14	22	22	18	11	12	100
1957-1966	1	11	24	17	21	11	15	100
1967-1976	2	12	19	20	22	12	13	100
1977-1981	4	10	26	21	18	9	12	100
1982-1989	17	17	24	14	13	9	6	100
Females								
1937-1946	4	70	17	5	2	1	1	100
1947-1956	3	63	22	6	3	1	2	100
1957-1966	1	47	26	12	9	2	3	100
1967-1976	3	42	26	15	9	3	2	100
1977-1981	7	30	31	17	10	3	2	100
1982-1989	33	28	22	8	6	2	1	100

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