

Familyhood and low fertility in Italy in comparative perspective

In this paper we analyze the interdependencies between family relationships among close relatives and reproductive behavior in Italy. Turning the second demographic transition argument on its head, some Italian demographers provocatively argued that it is the “too much family” both in terms of strong ties between relatives and of the “familistic” character of institutions - that lead Italians to have so few children at the end of the XX century (Livi Bacci 2000, 2001, Dalla Zuanna 2001). According to these interpretations of low fertility the close interdependence between generations would lead the younger generation to avoid, postpone, or in any case limit their assumption of parental responsibilities and commitments. However, while the ‘*too much family*’ argument may explain why we observe a comparatively long period of cohabitation between parents and adult children and the postponement of the transition to parenthood, there is no need that this postponement should not lead couples to have two children or more children - like it happens in France. Particularly so in a context like Italy where family is a resource in terms of childcare and economic support. Despite the popularity of the familistic arguments, there are virtually no convincing empirical research to clarify the way in which strong family ties would influence family formation and limit childbearing choices. Another way to read the consequences of family ties is using the concept of *familyhood* (or *famiglianza* in Italian). This term expresses the sense of identity provided by being part of a social group of relatives. Far from being an abstract construction, the *famiglianza* depicts the concrete consequences of the interdependence created by family practices, like caring and shared daily activities (Colombis 1997:402). Understanding the dynamics and the significance attributed to family relations and their expression in daily practices of exchanges and mutual expectations is pivotal to explain the role of strong ties on couples’ childbearing behavior and the reproduction of families.

We adopt a comparative case studies approach, focusing on two regions in Italy, Sardinia and Emilia Romagna, where the TFR recorded 1.06 and 1.24 in respectively (ISTAT 2004). Confronting these two cases could scarcely be more interesting to investigate the too much family argument since they are characterized by long term divergences in some

of the basic reproductive and family musters in the two regions of Emilia Romagna and Sardegna. On the one hand Sardinia's fertility has fallen from Italy's highest to its lowest in less than half a century, strong extended kin ties and the nuclear family have gone together for a long time and constitute an important aspect of the local culture of reproduction today. A strong emphasis on a female centered family solidarity is paralleled by a large postponement of the transition to parenthood, and by a still growing rise in women's active role in the labor market in the space of only one generation. On the other hand in the Emilia Romagna region women labor force participation has long been and still is the highest in the country and small family sizes are not a new phenomenon given that the average number of children per woman was already below 2 for the generations born in the 1920s (Barbagli et al. 2003: 240). In addition in this latter region until recently the reference network of relatives was centered around the man's relatives rather than the women's ones. Given these differences we question the way in which family is experienced via local patterns of exchange among family members and the meaning attributed to them affect the fertility behavior and family formation of the younger generatios.

We use a multi methods approach, taking advantage of two recent regional representative survey (The ISTAT *Famiglie e Soggetti Sociali* 1998 and 2003) and rich ethnographic data that we collected during 2004 and 2005 in the cities of Cagliari and Bologna, respectively the main administrative cities of the regions of Sardinia and of Emilia Romagna. The data from these two cross sectional surveys pooled together give us information on 40.000 households, which we will use to reconstruct by region a) the fertility histories of women and men, b) the residential patterns of parents and their adult children and c) the economic and social exchanges among relatives.

The extensive body of semi-structured interviews (for a total 104 in Cagliari and 87 in Bologna) and field observations from the two fieldsites (extended over a 12-month period) are rich sources on the individuals' relationship with his or her family of origin and the influence of such relationship on the family formation process of young women and their partners. The sample is diversified by women age group, social class, living

arrangements, and achieved parity at the moment of the interview. Both partners of a couple and, in all case when this was possible, also women's mothers have been interviewed. We examine desires, intentions and behavior related to family formation as well as family relationships reflecting the underlying culture of reproduction in this setting. We focus on family members' interdependencies, among co-resident as well as non co-resident members in the two regions. We pay particular attention to the practices, meanings, and expectations associated to economic and non economic exchanges in different phases of the life course of an individual in order to single out their effect on family formation.

The first results so far pertain only the Sardinian case study. They indicate that regular exchanges of care services and more general reciprocal collaboration among family members are expected and perceived as taken-for-granted obligations (care services extending from childcare to elder care) and mostly provided by a web of daughters, sisters, mothers and grandmothers. Care services are loaded with meanings, which go beyond their mere functional support. They are a means of constructing the sense of family itself, a daily channel for transmitting affection, discipline, habits, and knowledge to the children. Similarly the spouses' long and early premarital engagements appear to be a family '*project*'. Not only are these family projects in the sense that family formation is their aim, but they are also family projects in the sense that they involve relationships with both partners' families of origin. Parents consider their daughters or sons' future spouses as part of the family years before their children leaves the parental home to actually marry. If the constitution of the nuclear family is a family project it is easier to understand why family resources are mobilized to help realizing it, either by helping them financially or when this is not possible allowing the adult children to continue living at home to save money.

References

- Barbagli, M., M. Castiglioni, and G. Dalla Zuanna. 2003. *Fare famiglia in Italia*. Bologna: Il Mulino.
- Colombis A. 1997. "Invece del familismo: la famiglianza" In Meloni B. ed, *Famiglia meridionale senza familismo. Strategie economiche, reti di relazione e parentela*, Meridiana Libri, Catanzaro.
- Dalla Zuanna, G. 2001 "The banquet of Aeolus. A Familistic Interpretation of Italy's Lowest LowFertility" *Demographic Research*, 4(5), 1-29.
- Livi Bacci, M. S. S. 2000. "Trop de famille et trop peu d'enfants : la fécondité en Italie depuis 1960", *Cahiers québécois de démographie*, 29 (2):231-254.
- Livi Bacci, Massimo. 2001. "Too few children and too much family". *Daedalus*, 130(3): 139-155.