

Gender Differences in the Fertility Intentions of Italian Couples

Alessandro Rosina[°], Maria Rita Testa*

[°] Catholic University, Milan, Italy

* Maria Rita Testa, Vienna Institute of Demography

1. Introduction

Recently an increasing attention has been paid at the formation process of reproductive intentions in the demographic studies. Fertility intentions are considered the salience of purposive human behavior and therefore a crucial element in the analysis of fertility trends and changes. Given the possibility to control fertility and the broad access to contraception, people may decide to have many children as they want and at the time they consider right for themselves. This is particularly true in the modern societies where the normative pressure to follow socially prescribed models is weakening while the relevance of individual choices is increasing.

Since having a birth is a joint decision of both partners the analysis of partners' preferences combination takes a central role in the analysis of fertility intentions formation.

We focus on the determinants of childbearing intentions considering female and the male partner separately, but taking into account the characteristics of the other member of the couple.

We use the data of an Italian Household Multipurpose survey conducted in 2003. The survey is part of the International Generations and Gender Program and will enable us to develop a comparative analysis when the same data from other countries become available. Furthermore, a second wave of the survey is planned, and this will allow us to verify the correspondence between intentions and subsequent behavior in future studies.

In Italy the total fertility rate is around 1.3 children per woman, while the average desired family size is slightly higher than 2 (Istat, 2006).

Our main research questions are:

1. How much does the possible disagreement within the couple contribute to this gap?
2. What is the influence of a late family formation on the couple childbearing intentions, and concordant intentions?
3. How much decreases the likelihood to have a child, both for men as well as for women, as individual move through their reproductive period?

We will adopt a parity specific approach, since the influence of wives on husbands and vice versa has been found to change with the number of previously born children (Beckman et al. 1983).

2. Background

In the studies focused on behavioral fertility preferences and their correspondence with subsequent behaviors, partner's intentions are considered as one of the most relevant factors. Several analyses have emphasized this aspect at the empirical level suggesting that the presence of disagreement may bring to a postponement of actual childbearing (Thomson et al. 1990; Thomson, 1997; Hoem and Thomson, 1998). In particular, the effects of a disagreement in intentions may contain two separated components: a so called "signed difference effect", which depends on the decision rule at work within the couple, i.e., whether the wife or the husband predominates, and the so called

“absolute difference effect”, which mostly causes, by creating some inertia, a delaying effect, independently on which spouse wants what (Miller and Pasta, 1995). Furthermore, some research has shown that husbands and wives influence their spouses equally when there is disagreement (Thomson et al. 1990), while other studies have revealed the wife to have greater influence (Beckman, 1984).

At the theoretical level Miller and Pasta (1994 and 1995) have described the partners’ intentions as one of the three main factors responsible of a failure in the realization of previously declared wished fertility. Particularly, in their ‘Psychology of Child-Timing’ (1994), the authors found that both individual and his/her spouse are important in the formation of intentions, but females consider more relevant their own desires, while males treat their own child-timing intentions as equal as that of their wives, and they interpret this result with the fact that women have a more central role in childrearing activities in the U.S.A., where their study has been conducted. The same reasons justify the evidence that the presence of marital dissatisfaction or conflicts appear to affect only men’s child-timing, being a reason for intended delay of childbearing (Miller and Pasta 1994).

3. Data and methods

We use data from the Multipurpose Household Survey on "Family and Social Subjects", held in Italy at the end of 2003. The survey unit is the household, so that information on the both members of the couples is available in the data. Questions on fertility intentions are asked to people aged 18 to 49.

We concentrate on possible partner disagreement and on whether the propensity of stating positive childbearing intentions decrease by age at a similar pace among male and female partners.

We implement multinomial logit models where the dependent variable is codes as follows: “both partners intend to have a child”, “only female (or male) partner intends to have a child”, “none of the partner intend to have a child”. The model are run separately on the female and male sub-sample, but the characteristics of the other member of the couple will be considered in the set of the explanatory variables.

4. Results

Table 1 shows the proportion of couples with and without children, by age of the woman. We see that at the extreme female reproductive ages, 45-49 years, those couples remaining childless are only 8%.

Figures 1 and 2 show that the short-term fertility intentions are more frequently reported by childless couples, as compared to couples who have already started their reproductive career. The probability to want a child declines with age, and this declining pattern is steeper among women, especially women older than 30. Before reaching 30 years, around 98% of childless women living in a union report birth intentions, while the analogous proportion is around 90% for the male counterparts. In contrast, at older ages, i.e., 40-44, men are more likely to wish a child than women: 60% of men intend to have a child, while only 40% of women do so.

The weaker intentions at older ages may be influenced by the perception of a lower ability to conceive, as well as by a selection effect (i.e., old childless couples without children are also those who have a less positive attitude towards childbearing). In order to control for this selection process, we analyze only people answering yes to the following question: “If you would have a child in the next three years, would this be better or worse for your life joy and happiness”? As we can see in Figures 3 and 4, changes by age are relevant especially among women: the intention to

have a birth is relatively high till the age of 40, while decreases substantially afterwards, becoming lower than that of men only at old ages. The consistent decline after the age of 40 is related to the lower biological possibilities of conceiving and the higher risks of malformation, both associated to the female age (Rizzi et al. 2005). Interestingly, the couple disagreement is relatively rare.

Table 2 shows the estimates of the multinomial logit model run on the female partners. The response variable is coded as “both intend”, “woman intends, but men not”, “Woman does not intend, but man intends”. The explanatory variables are: age (of both partners), education (of both partners), religiousness, and marital status.

As we may see, cohabiting couples are less likely to make childbearing plans, other things being equal. Moreover the likelihood not to want a child increases monotonically with the increase of female age. For men the probability to have negative fertility intentions is highest in the age group 30-34, consistently with results shown in Figure 4. This is also the age group where the probability of partners’ disagreement is lower. High educational level of women is positively associated with the intentions to have a child, but this result may be due to the selection process, since the women with higher educational levels are also those who postpone their childbearing longer and more often. Finally, religiousness, as measured by mass attendance, has a positive effect on the female short-time fertility intentions, but also on the partner disagreement.

5. Conclusions

The preliminary results are very interesting. They highlight the relevance of couple agreement/disagreement in the formulation of childbearing intentions. We intend to develop a more in-depth analysis on the couple childbearing decision-making process in the further research. More specifically, in the next steps we will add some additional covariates, like an indicator of the quality of the couple relationship. Moreover, we will analyze also the intentions of male partner.

References

- Beckman, L.J. 1983. Communication, power, and the influence of social network in couple decisions on fertility, in: Bulatao, R.A., and R.D. Lee (Eds.) *Determinants of fertility in developing countries*, Vol.2, New York: Academic Press, pp.415-443.
- Beckman, L.J. 1984. Husbands’ and wives’ relative influence on fertility decisions and outcomes. *Population and Environment: Behavioral and Social Issues*, 7, 182-197.
- Istat (2006), “La vita di coppia”, *Informazioni* n. 23 – 2006.
- Miller, W. B. and D.J. Pasta 1994. The psychology of child timing : a measurement instrument and a model. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 24 (3), 218-250.
- Miller, W. B. and D.J. Pasta 1995. Behavioural intentions: which ones predict fertility behaviour in married couples ? *Journal of Applied Social Psychology*, 25, 530-555.
- Rizzi E., Rosina A., Colombo B. (2005), " On age effect: results from a detailed prospective study on daily fecundability", *Revue d'épidémiologie et de santé publique/Epidemiology and Public Health*, Special Issue on "Late parenthood", November 2005, Vol.53.
- Thomson, E. 1997. Couple Childbearing Desires, Intentions and Births, *Demography*, Vol.34, No.3, pp.343-354.
- Thomson, E., and J. Hoem. 1998. Couple Childbearing Plans and Births in Sweden. *Demography*. 35, 315-322.

Tables and Figures

Tab. 1 – Couples with and without children, by age of the woman.

	Without children	With children	Total	A.V.
<30	40.79	59.21	100	913
30-34	23.09	76.91	100	1378
35-39	11.66	88.34	100	1846
40-44	8.19	91.81	100	1588
45-49	7.96	92.04	100	598

Tab. 2 - Results of the logistic multinomial model on the intention to have a child (within three years). Effects on “intention no” and on “intention yes but male partner in discordance”, versus “intention yes and partner yes”. Women aged 18-49.

		Intention no		Intention yes, but partner no	
		Parameter	SE	Parameter	SE
Intercept		-0.0464	0.1501	-2.2721	0.3002
Type of union	Cohabitation	0.5144	0.1162	0.2777	0.1741
	Marriage				
Age (her)	<30	-1.1357	0.2678	0.3906	0.4063
	30-34	-0.1635	0.2022	0.1544	0.3901
	35-39	-0.1381	0.1882	-0.1380	0.3866
	40-44				
	45+	1.0744	0.3988	-0.196	0.8683
Age (him)	<30	-0.2801	0.2719	0.1625	0.3482
	30-34	-1.5802	0.2176	-1.0462	0.3237
	35-39	-0.1489	0.1744	-0.1039	0.3046
	40-44				
	45+	1.6106	0.2943	0.9101	0.5562
Education (her)	University	-0.424	0.1742	-0.2663	0.2764
	High school	-0.0041	0.1238	0.0455	0.1926
	Lower				
Education (him)	University	0.1502	0.1876	0.2755	0.2810
	High school	-0.0571	0.1291	-0.0069	0.1972
	Lower				
Mass attendance (her)	At least once a month	-0.5806	0.166	0.7148	0.2547
	Less than one a month	-0.2590	0.1381	-0.1162	0.2217
	Never				
Mass attendance (him)	At least once a month	0.0397	0.1706	-0.6395	0.2424
	Less than one a month	-0.0203	0.1335	-0.2443	0.1943
	Never				

Fig 1 – Intention to have a child (within three years and in the future). Individuals in couple with children

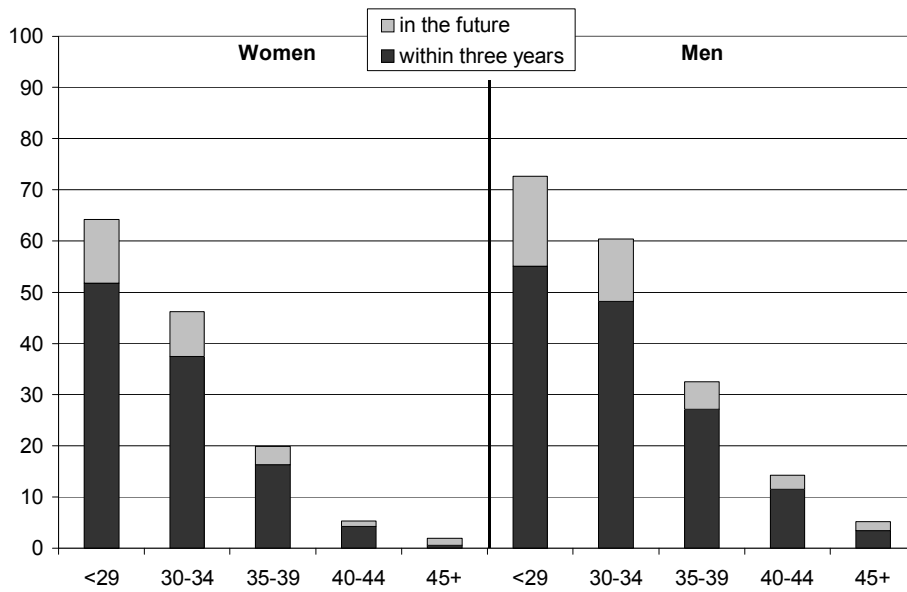


Fig. 2 – Intention to have a child (within three years and in the future). Individuals in couple without children

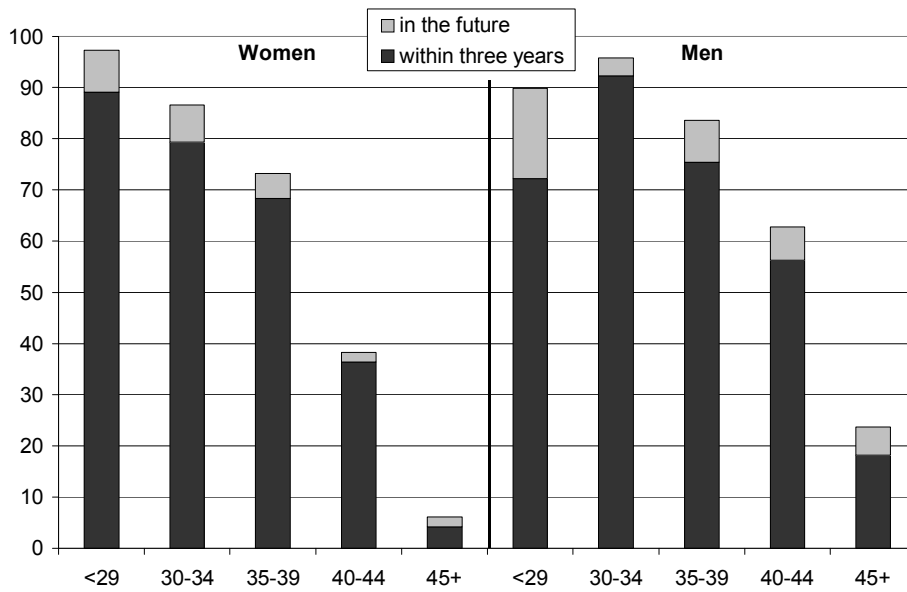
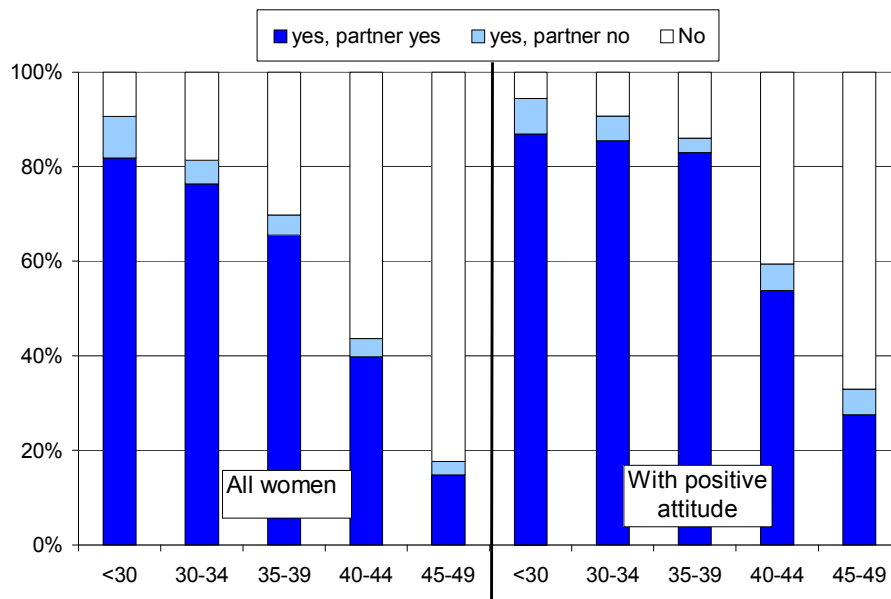
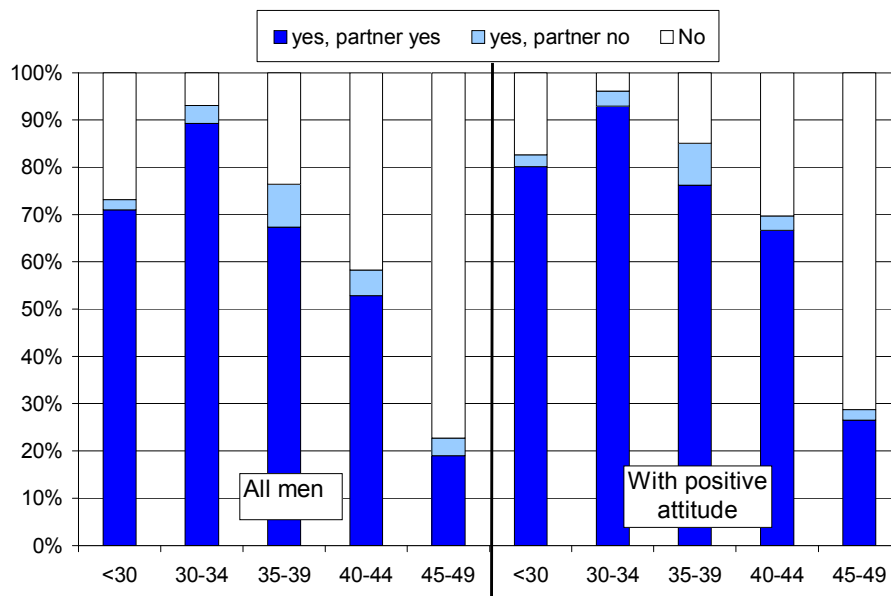


Fig. 3 – Women in couple without children by own intention (and concordance with the partner) to have a child within three years. All women and women with positive attitude*.



* People answering yes to the question: “If you would have a child in the next three years, would this be better or worse for your life joy and happiness?”

Fig. 4 – Men in couple without children by own intention (and concordance with the partner) to have a child within three years. All men and men with positive attitude*.



* People answering yes to the question: “If you would have a child in the next three years, would this be better or worse for your life joy and happiness?”