Kinship relationships and reproductive biographies in Italy

Most empirical work on European fertility focuses on low fertility and the determinants of fertility decline after the 1960s. Interest in the variability of reproductive life courses is limited to the extent to which it highlights the main factors influencing completed fertility. However, there is some evidence for the inter-temporal interdependency of events within the individual life course. For instance, it has been consistently and repetitively shown that early marriage and early motherhood are positively correlated with a faster transition to higher parities and with the final number of children a woman has (Bumpass et al 1978; Finnas & Hoem 1980). Because of this time self-referentiality of the reproductive life course, the length of a given birth interval is partly determined by the length of previous intervals (Heckman et al 1985) and birth sequences seem to follow recognizable patterns (Rodríguez et al. 1984). An examination of these different patterns in Southern Europe acquires particular interest given the uninterrupted increase of age at first birth in this region.

A recent and explorative study by Houle and Shkolnikov, (2005) analyzes completed fertility histories of selected European countries. Their findings show that sequence clusters are mainly driven by age at first birth. However, the authors also show that a separate group is constituted by women who started childbearing early, but postponed the birth of the second child more so than did the average. The authors interpret this as an effect of remarriage and its related desire to intensify the new bond by committing to parenthood with the new partner.

Building on this study, our research project aims at identifying reproductive "patterns" in the different Italian regions, that is classifying women with completed fertility according to the temporal sequence with which they bore their children. Italy is a particularly interesting case study for such an empirical investigation since regional variations in reproductive outcomes is considerable in the generations aged 40-45 at the end of the 1990s (born 1953-1958). Hypotheses about the effect of different family relationships on fertility timing and reproductive histories have never been thoroughly tested before, despite a growing anthropological literature pointing at the role of the long term effect that the local cultures of the family has on fertility behavior (ref.). We use the Italian FSS 1998 (and pool it with the FSS 2003 when the

official release is available), a national survey of households, representative at the regional level (20 regions) and containing rich information on individual reproductive, educational employment histories, and on kinship relationships.

We analyze the reproductive behavior of the generations of women who initiated postponing union formation and subsequent fertility in Italy (Rosina, 2004), who represent younger generations than those of the FFS base study by Houle and Shkolnikov, (2005). We expect that age at first birth drives reproductive outcomes in the same way. In addition, given the low divorce and separation rates in Italy for the generations considered, we test whether the hypothesis on the remarriage effect holds (in this case, it should concern very few women). Taking a regional perspective allows us to check whether the clustering of reproductive patterns reflects some cultural pattern (like the kind of the family's social organization, specific norms concerning marriage and childbearing timing). We identify the distribution of less frequent sequences (late first birth for parity 3) and their prevalence in specific regions, testing whether they are correlated to specific characteristics of kinship.

Our main analytical approach is cluster and regression analysis. Cluster analysis on variables like age at birth and spacing between births identify the main factors determining typical sequences. Regression analyses are deemed to test whether individual characteristics (education, number of marriages etc.) and socio-cultural factors (characteristics of kinship relationships and family formation norms) influence the shape of reproductive "patterns". The dependent variable in this case is the probability to belong to one specific cluster. Our interpretation of the statistical evidence on the role of family relationships on fertility is guided by the results of 200 semi-structured interviews carried out with women aged 20-45 in four Italian urban settings characterized by different family norms and practices. We consider the probability of experiencing a certain reproductive career as a whole, offering an valuable alternative perspective on the effects of postponement of childbearing than the one obtained by examining each birth choice at once (a specific birth or a specific interval between births).

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