

# Too Much Family Revisited

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## **Introduction**

An intriguing theory used to explain very low fertility levels in Southern Europe, and Italy in particular, is that of “too much family” (Reher 1998; Livi Bacci 2001; Dalla Zuanna 2001, 2006). Demographers have provocatively argued that the strong ties between relatives and the “familistic” nature of institutions have led to considerable interdependence between generations, inducing younger cohorts to delay departure from the parental home and relatedly, avoid, postpone, or limit their entry into parenthood. As Livi Bacci (2001: 152) puts it, “traditional Italian familism, under the pressure of social change, has taken a new direction: instead of ‘widening’ and extending support, allegiance, and solidarity to a large number of children and kin, it is ‘deepening’ its action, protecting, prolonging, supporting grown-up children, and delaying their exit from the family nest”. Despite, however, the popularity of the “too much family” hypothesis, very few convincing empirical studies demonstrate the ways in which strong kin ties influence family formation and limit childbearing choices.

In this paper we argue that the adoption of a monolithic vision of the Mediterranean – which in the socio-demographic literature has become the epitome of the “strong family” – is not only misleading, but masks significant geographical differences in the relationship between the “strong family” and fertility outcomes. A nuanced analysis of the different facets of kinship relations and intergenerational ties across four Italian cities reveals not only the ambivalent and often conflictual dimensions of the “strong family,” but also profound regional differences, especially between the North and the South of Italy. These differences in turn provide a window through which to understand diverse regional patterns in fertility rates, such as continued low birth rates in the South and the recent upturn in fertility in the northern regions.

Through an anthropological demographic lens, we analyze the processes of constructing meaning and identity through kinship and the impact of the latter on fertility outcomes using data from 136 interviews with women age 33-45 conducted in 2005-2006 in Padua, Bologna, Cagliari, and Naples. We contend that a better understanding of the diverse ways the “strong family” is experienced and defined, sheds light on regional variation in fertility trends. More broadly, this study contributes to the ongoing debate as to whether demographic behavior in the South of Italy simply “lags” behind that of the North (and will therefore eventually come to resemble the latter), or if the South is fundamentally different from the North.

## **Theoretical Background**

Sociologists, anthropologists, and demographers have made a significant contribution to understanding kinship relations and family formation in Italy (Barbagli 1984; Barbagli and Kertzer 1992; Solinas 1993; Kertzer and Saller 1991; Rosina and Viazzo 2008). Such studies have revealed the historical complexity of the family in Italy, characterized by profound socio-cultural and regional differences (Micheli 2000), challenging indiscriminate notions of “familism” (Banfield 1958). For example, in northern and central Italy, the “complex family” has historically taken precedence over other familial forms. Young people often left home to work as servants and then returned to live with parents or relatives. Patrilinearity was dominant, and a single male heir often continued to live in his parents’ home, while younger sibling would depart. In the South, on the other hand, Italians have typically married earlier, creating a nuclear family close to the parental home. The family’s inheritance was most commonly distributed among all of the children, and matrilinearity often prevailed such that new couples lived close to the wife’s parents (Barbagli and Kertzer 1992). Micheli (2008) has suggested that contemporary

differences in kin relations in Italy have their roots in these two very different models of the “strong family”.

Indeed, although convergence in terms of residential proximity, late ages at departure from the parental home and decreasing co-residence is currently observed across Italian macro-regions, important specific regional diversities persist (Barbagli et al. 2003; Micheli 2006; Santarelli and Cottone 2009). For example, in the North, young Italians tend leave the home somewhat earlier than in the South (Billari and Ongaro 1999) and when they do leave they are more likely to experience modern residential forms (e.g. cohabitation with partner, colleagues or students) (Rosina and Fraboni 2004; Di Giulio and Rosina 2007). On the other hand, such departure is often “unfocused” and sees a sort of “revolving door” between the family of origin and the new family nucleus (Micheli 2008: 80). In the South, on the other hand, young adults leave home later than in the North, doing so mainly to marry (this is particularly true of women). Yet exit from the family home is more of “clear-cut” departure, and a greater distinction is made in terms of establishing a separate home and an independent family (idem). Such geographic variance reflects not only differences in the nature of family relationships and intergenerational ties, but suggests that the Mediterranean model cannot be homogenously applied to Italy.

Diverse familial models also hint at different socio-cultural constructions of identity. Anthropologists such as Segalen (2005) have argued that kinship represents a determinant element in the construction of identity in contemporary society. She underlines how, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, affectivity became a primary element in defining family ties. Other scholars have similarly shown how the continuity of kinship and the cultivation of a familial sentiment act as central elements in the production of modern identity (Attias-Donfu et al. 2002; Grilli 2008). Anthropologists have also shed much light on the complexities of different kinds of kinship, such as affine (related through marriage) and consanguine (related through ‘blood’) and the ways these relate to the construction of identity and social organization. An investigation of “too much family” is thus a reflection on how “strong” ties are defined; on the ways experiences and discourse are intertwined with representations of the family, and on how kinship shapes and is simultaneously molded by specific political, economic and social factors. More broadly, a fruitful dialogue between the demographic literature on “strong” family ties in the Mediterranean (Reher 1998; Micheli 2006), and the anthropological literature on kinship in complex societies (Strathern 1992; Edwards 2000; Attias-Donfut et al. 2002; Solinas 2004; Grilli 2008) can provide much insight not only into the particular facets of the Italian family, but how regional differences in kinship relations and identity formation impact fertility patterns.

## **Demographic Setting**

Italy is a country characterized by persistent low fertility levels, and in fact had the lowest fertility rate in the world in the early 1990s at 1.18 children per woman. Fertility rates have since gradually increased to today’s current fertility level of 1.3 in 2008. Yet the moderate increase in fertility hides considerable regional patterns (Santini 1995; De Sandre 2000; Caltabiano et al. 2007; Caltabiano 2008).

In the northern regions of Italy, the decline in fertility slowed or even stopped beginning with the cohorts born in the 1970s, and in some regions fertility levels have begun to increase (Caltabiano 2008). This is in part due to an increasing number of infants born to immigrants, whose fertility is higher than that of native Italians. On the other hand, native Italian fertility has slightly increased as well, due both to “new” forms of family formation among younger cohorts, and to a “recovery” of birth among older cohorts (Caltabiano et al. 2007). In fact, as Caltabiano

et al. (2007) show through a comparison of cumulated cohort fertility rates (CCFRs), there is an increasing tendency in the North among younger cohorts to “recover” fertility after the age of 30 (beginning childbearing later). In the South, on the other hand, fertility continues to decline for cohorts born in the 1970s, or has only recently stabilized at very low levels. For the younger cohorts (e.g. 1975, 1980), the timing of fertility begins only slightly later than the older cohorts, and there is relatively little recovery of fertility at older ages. On the other hand, the Italian National Institute of Statistics (2007), using TFR data by parity at the regional level, has shown that the ratio of first births to total births in a number of southern regions increased, while the ratio of 3+ order births decreased; suggesting a partial convergence toward the northern model (cfr. Caltabiano 2008).

The combination of postponement and higher fertility rates in the North mirrors trends in other countries such as the Netherlands and France, where high age at first birth is not always associated with low birth rates. In fact, while initially a rise in women’s education attainment and related growth in female labor force participation was associated with a delay and decline in fertility, recent comparative studies have demonstrated that the renouncement or limitation of fertility on the part of women has attenuated -or is even non-existent- in countries with favorable contexts to the reconciliation of work and childcare (Pinnelli and Di Giulio 2003). In Italy, women in the North are much more likely to be in the paid labor force than those in the South: in the mid- 1990s, 64% of women aged 20-49 in the northwest worked compared to only 36% in the South. Even more strikingly, 41% of southern women had never been in the labor force, compared to only 7% of those in the Northwest. Among women with children under age six in the mid-1990s, 62% of the northerners and only 31% of the southerners were employed (Kertzer et al. 2008).

Such results suggest that 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 such postponement should prohibit couples from having two or more children. More broadly, differences in female participation in the labor force raise questions about how diverse forms of “too much family” and kinship relations may enable or hinder not only departure from the parental home, but the reconciliation of career ambitions and fertility desires. In this paper we ask: Are regional patterns in fertility in Italy related to a qualitatively diverse nature of intergenerational ties, kin relations, and identity formation? How, in turn, is kinship shaped by specific political, economic and socio-cultural factors?

## **Data and Methods**

Our analysis is based on large dataset of 349 in-depth interviews and field notes from participant observation gathered in 2005-2006 in four Italian cities: Bologna, Padua, Naples, and Cagliari. The different urban settings reflect our interest in examining important regional differences not only in fertility trends, but in the specific socio-cultural, political, and economic factors which shape the latter. In fact, the first two cities are situated in the North (albeit in regions with relatively different socio-economic, cultural, and political histories), the third in the South, and the fourth on the island of Sardinia.

While the scope of these interviews is wide-ranging, subjects were spoken with extensively about a number of aspects relevant to family formation and kinship ties. All interviews include a detailed reconstruction of the respondents’ life course development from adolescence to adulthood, information concerning the respondents’ family of origin and peer

group, the major events and transitions related to employment, partnerships, unions, and family formation. The final data set also includes, among other things, specific information on the interviewees' reason for leaving the parental home (i.e. marriage, university, work, etc), their residential proximity to their mother, mother-in-law, father, and father-in-law (e.g. same building, same town, etc), and number of children.

In order to facilitate analysis, each of the interviews was transcribed and examined using Nvivo, a qualitative data software management and analysis program. As a “code-based theory builder,” the program offers the “tools to manage, store, extract, compare, explore, and reassemble meaningful pieces of the data flexibly and systematically” (Manning and Smock 2005:993). For example, we are able to choose and compare women with 0-1 child and women with 2+ children within and across the four cities, combining qualitative data from the interview narratives with quantitative data on residential proximity and reasons for leaving the parental home. More broadly, the use of Nvivo allows us to critically examine the nuances and differences in “too much family” within and across these urban contexts, as well as tie our results to specific fertility outcomes both within this sample and, more broadly, to patterns that emerge from national analyses of reproductive behavior.

## **Results**

First results confirm the existence of very different formulations of the “strong family” in northern and southern urban settings, but also reveal a general ambivalence in terms of notions of kinship, in some cases accompanied by considerable conflict between consanguine and affine kin. Comments from mothers of women of reproductive age such as, “I get along with the husband of my daughter as if he was a son for me,” provide insight into the construction of kinship through discourse, from affine to consanguine. In a similar vein, unmarried women in long-term relationships frequently use kin terminology such as “brothers-in-law,” “nephews” and “mother-and-law”. The attempt to “reclassify” affine kin in consanguine terms complicates the “management” of kin relationships and hints at the necessity of constantly renegotiating relationships dictated by social determined codes and values. On the other hand, even relationships of consanguinity are often reevaluated. Nuclear families emerge from a complex dynamic created by the centripetal forces of the two families of origin, where the morality of kin ties are expressed in the exchange of care and economic aid; kinship is perceived as a resource yet, at the same time, an onerous commitment. Such dynamics challenge an easy definition of “too much family,” but also shed light on regional differences in reproductive behavior.

For example, we find, in Naples the tendency of consanguine kin to exclude affine relations established through marriage and/or the independent new nuclear family. Strong relations between sons and their mothers, and wives who feel as if they are “intruders” contribute to significant ambivalence in kinship relations. More broadly, kin relations in Naples tend to be both close *and* conflictual, above all between affines (i.e. between the two families of origin of the couple), which translates into a continual renegotiation of kin relationships, and often the search, if rarely obtained, for greater autonomy on the part of married couples.

Findings from Bologna and Padua contrast with results from in Naples. There is less competition between the two lines of descent, in that affine relationships through marriage are less hostile. On the other hand, these cities share with Naples the very close relationships that exist between mothers and daughters. More broadly, relationships between parents and children in Padua and Bologna are seemingly stronger than those in Naples, in that interviewees described kin relations as mutually consensual, less characterized by conflict, more intimate and trusting.

This may be related to residential proximity of close relatives which tends to be further than that in Naples. On the other hand, the intimate nature of kin relations often meant that women postponed marriage and reproductive choices. Not only do daughters in Bologna and Padua seem to feel more like children than adults, but newly formed couples are rarely entirely autonomous, nor seem to be determined to reach this objective.

In Cagliari, ambivalent kinship relations and contradictions are particularly evident. Here the importance of social mobility plays a fundamental role in structuring kin relations and fertility decisions and highlights specific ideological contrasts between generations. While kinship networks have narrowed due to persistent low fertility, kin relations outside of the nuclear family continue to carry great weight. The intimate nature of relationships with the family of origin and the non-conflictual dynamics with affine kin resemble the northern cities more closely than the more problematic context observed in Naples. Low fertility in Cagliari may part be explained by the contrast between past economic recession and the today's greater economic prosperity and gender equality. While the interviewees in Cagliari have increasingly freed themselves of thinking of kin relations as morally binding, and have begun to think of family obligations in terms of choice (and thus in less conflictual ways), an opposition between old and new attitudes towards kinship contributes to very low birthrates.

Across the four cities, the attitudes and suggestions of the parents of childbearing couples significantly impact fertility, often a consequence of their direct involvement in providing care for grandchildren. While residential proximity between new couples and families of origin in part determines the frequency with which families members spend time together, this aspect does not seem to directly influence fertility. Rather, it is the *quality* of kin relations that makes a difference. While interviewees spoke of the importance of ties with their family of origin, especially in economic and care terms, kinship was also described as having a “viscous” nature: both desired and valued, but also somewhat ambiguous, and even conflictual. The relationship between nuclear families and close relatives (siblings and parents of the spouses) delineates a series of practices which constantly redefine the boundaries of intimacy and daily life. Contradictions emerge between the non-negotiable moral value of genealogical bonds, and a felt necessity to revisit kin relationships in terms of individual choice, free of “natural” constraints. The “morality” of kin ties, the “management” of containing the boundaries between the nuclear family and kin, and the constant re-elaboration of consanguine and affine kin, give life to “modern” Italian families.

In further developing this extended abstract into a paper, we intend to continue our qualitative investigation as outlined in the methods section, while combining the later with quantitative findings on regional differences in fertility behavior in Italy.

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