

Fertility dynamics in France and Italy. Who are the couples who do not give birth to the intended child?

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Objective

France and Italy lie at the two extremes as regards fertility levels in Europe. On the one hand, Italy is now one of the industrialized countries with the lowest average number of children per woman in the world (slightly higher than 1.3), while its neighbour, France, is announcing to the press the evidence of 828 thousand births in 2008 (Insee, 2009), and the European record of persistent and high fertility, close to the famous replacement fertility level. A natural question thus arises: why is fertility in France higher than in Italy? This paper represents a continuation of a previous study where we demonstrated that the vast majority of women still desire two children in both countries – even if in France the wish to have a larger family appears to be relatively more frequent than in Italy (Vignoli and Régnier-Loilier, 2009). Moreover, the profiles of women who do not desire the standard two-child family are also very similar in France and Italy: women wishing to have a lone child or to have a larger family display very similar demographic and socio-economic characteristics in both countries (Régnier-Loilier and Vignoli, 2008). In short, France and Italy do not show strong differences regarding the ideational fertility pattern. However, since the actual fertility levels are so different, there could be some sorts of constraints that limit fertility more strongly in Italy than in France. In this paper we aim at highlighting the profiles of those couples who do not realize their intended fertility projects in France and Italy.

Background

Applying the famous “Theory of Planned Behaviours” of Ajzen (1991) to family and fertility research, it may be argued that the *observed* reproductive behaviors do not depend solely on individual characteristics, but they also derive from fertility *intentions* (e.g., Ongaro, 1982; Palomba, 1991; De Sandre *et al.*, 1997; Sorvillo and Marsili, 1999; Goldstein *et al.*, 2004; Testa and

Grilli, 2006; Mills *et al.*, 2008). Fertility intentions can be *positive* or *negative*: the former define the desire to have (another) child, while the latter the desire to not have (another) child. The literature on the correspondence between fertility intentions and subsequent outcomes is not very abundant, especially due the severe lack of appropriate longitudinal data. However, to the best of our knowledge, documented findings all point to a general statement: negative fertility intentions are a well-functioning predictor of subsequent fertility behavior, while positive fertility intentions tend to systematically overestimate fertility realizations (Westoff and Ryder, 1977; Monnier, 1989; Schoen *et al.*, 1999; Symeonidou, 2000; Noack and Østby, 2002; Toulemon and Testa, 2005; Testa and Toulemon, 2006; Meggiolaro, 2009; Rinesi, 2009).

Many factors have been found in the literature to increase (or decrease) the gap between positive fertility intentions and their subsequent realization (or, conversely, non-realization). A pivotal role is played by demographic factors: in particular women's age and parity are crucial (e.g., Noack and Østby, 2002; Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan, 2003; Testa and Toulemon, 2006; Rinesi, 2009). Moreover, the larger the distance between actual and expected number of children, the faster the transition towards higher parities in a short period (Thompson *et al.*, 1990; Symeonidou, 2000). The type of union, too, is important, even if its effect is not the same everywhere: for instance, married couples are more likely to realize their intention of having (another) child in the United States (Schoen *et al.*, 1999; Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan, 2003), while in France the type of union does not show any significant influence on subsequent fertility behaviors (Toulemon and Testa, 2005). The effect of gender roles also seems to vary in different contexts (see, for example, Thomson, 1997 for Sweden, and Symeonidou, 2000 for Greece). Moving to socio-economic factors, the impact of education, *ceteris paribus*, is similar in France and Italy: the gap is the lowest for highly educated women (Toulemon and Testa, 2005; Rinesi, 2009). The opposite effect of education (i.e. higher likelihood of realizing the intended fertility observed among the least educated women) is found for the United States (Quesnel-Vallée and Morgan, 2003). Among the pure economic factors, Rinesi (2009) shows for Italy that those individuals who are experiencing a more stable situation (i.e. those who work and are home-owners) are more likely to realize the desired parity. Also as regards France, economic uncertainty appears to play a pivotal role: in the paper by Testa and Toulemon (2006) being unemployed significantly enlarges the gap between fertility intentions and realization.

Data

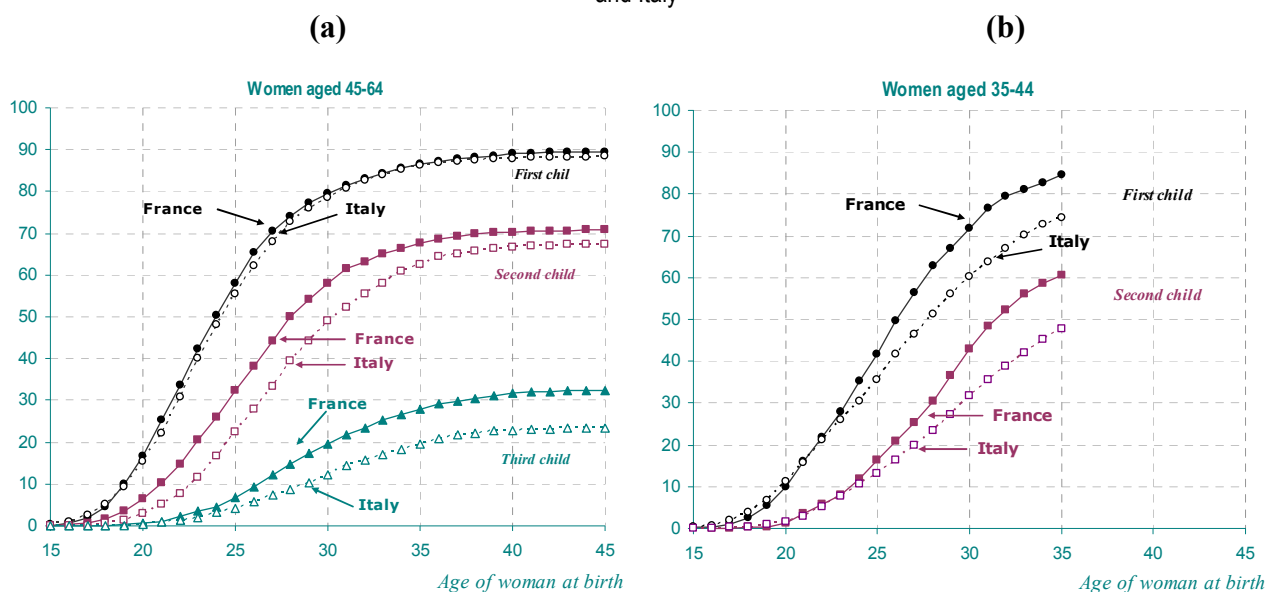
The study is based on the Gender and Generation Surveys and their corresponding follow-up surveys for France (2005, round 1 – 2008, round 2) and Italy (2003, round 1 – 2006, round 2). The French surveys, called “Étude des relations familiales et intergénérationnelle”, were jointly conducted by INED (Institut National d'Études Démographiques) and INSEE (Institut National de la Statistique et des Études Économiques) – GGS-ERFI (2005). The Italian variant of the GGS is a retrospective survey conducted in Italy by the Italian National Statistical Office (ISTAT) called “Family and Social Subjects” in 2003 – GGS-FSS (2003). Its follow-up survey was jointly conducted by Istat and the Ministry of Labor in 2006. The harmonized questions on fertility intentions and realization within the Gender and Generation Program ensure a meaningful comparison of the two countries.

Observed and intended fertility in France and Italy: a preliminary glance

Focusing on women aged between 45 and 64 years at the time of the GGS (round 1) interview, we did not observe any remarkable differences between France and Italy for the timing of the first childbirth (**Figure 1a**). In particular, among this group, 58% of French women and 55% of Italian women had already given birth to the first child by age 25. At the end of their reproductive span, these percentages had risen to 90% and 88%, respectively. For these generations, we observe some differences as regards the timing of the second child. The latter is relatively postponed in Italy – Italian women aged 30 have had a second child in 49% of cases, against 58% of their French counterparts – and, at the end of their reproductive life, the Italians who have given birth to a second child are less numerous – 67% in Italy against 71% in France. This differences are even more amplified for the timing of the third child.

For the younger cohorts (women aged 35-44 at the time of the interview) we observe that both the first and the second child are postponed with respect the oldest cohorts (**Figure 1b**). This is true especially in Italy, where 35% of women in this age group have already given birth to the first child at age 25 versus 42% in France (the difference between the two countries rose from 3 to 7 percentage points going from the oldest to the younger generations). These differences do not seem to be due solely to fertility postponement, because at age 35 the divergence still persists. Namely, 84% and 61% of French women had had a first and second child, while in Italy these percentage were just 74% and 47%, respectively. Finally, among the youngest cohorts (aged 25-34 at the time of the interview), the difference in the timing of the first child is even more pronounced between the two countries, with a trend towards a much longer first child postponement in Italy (figure not shown).

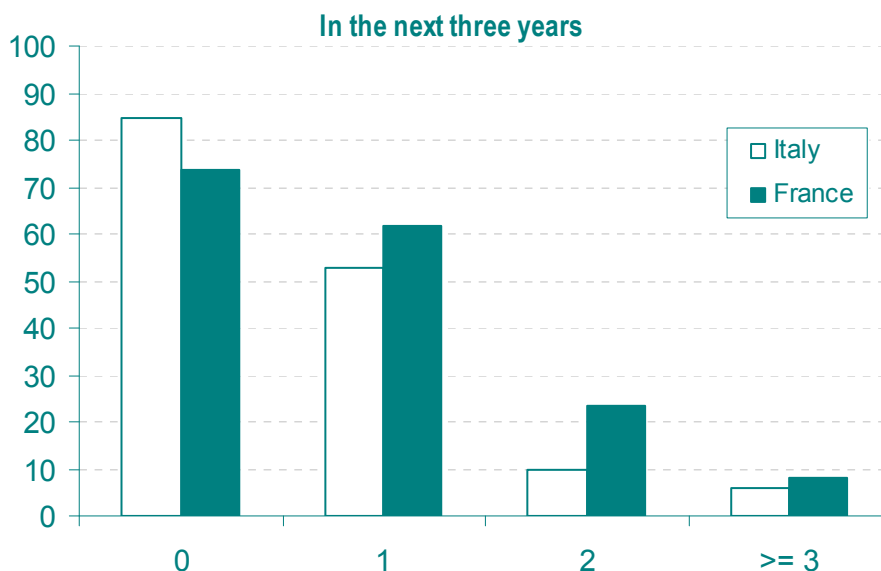
Figure 1. Aggregate percentage of women having a first (second or third, resp.) child, according to the age at childbearing in France and Italy



Source: Own calculations based on GGS-ERFI (2005) and FSS-GGS(2003).

Some insight can also be drawn as regards fertility intentions in the following three years (**Figure 2**). Among childless women aged 20-40, the intention to give birth to the first child appears less pronounced in France than in Italy (74% against 85%). On the contrary, among women who already have children, the intention to have both a second or a third child is higher in France than in Italy.

Figure 2. Intention to have (another) child in the next three years by parity in France and Italy



Source: Own calculations based on GGS-ERFI (2005) and FSS-GGS(2003).

All in all, although previous findings showed that desired fertility is very similar in France and Italy (Régnier-Loilier and Vignoli, 2008; Vignoli and Régnier-Loilier, 2009), the glance at the intentions to have a child in the following three years points to a country-specific difference. Namely, in France reproductive intentions are higher than in Italy for all parities. This may be due to the fact that fertility intentions are more closely related to the individual socio-economic situation as well as to the institutional context.

Three years later: realizations vs. intentions

The research will continue to analyze the follow-up of the French and the Italian surveys, both in a descriptive and a regression framework. In particular, we will aim at highlighting, in a comparative perspective, which are the main constraints to the realization of fertility projects. Are they mainly demographic factors? Are they factors related to economic factors (such as periods of unemployment or precarious jobs)? Are they factors related to the couple role-set? Or, are they dependent on the family network?

All in all, who are the couples that after three years have not realized their intended fertility? Do they present different characteristics in France and Italy? This line of reasoning may provide important input to policy makers wishing to lift the constraints to fertility realization.

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