

Parenthood: an advanced step in the transition to adulthood

Diventare genitori: una fase avanzata della transizione allo stato adulto

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Abstract Parenthood constitutes a crucial stage and one of the most challenging phases of the life cycle. Timing of the transition to adulthood has changed across cohorts according to two different patterns, housing independence and family formation. Postponement of childbearing appears a rational choice for women to assure higher educational level and labour market participation, but it refers also to a value and sociocultural change.

A remarkable postponement is taking place in Italy: TFR rapidly lowers as can be seen by fertility trends in cohort analysis. By cohorts, the average number of children per woman in Italy decreases: 2.5 in the early 1920s (mean age at childbearing 28.6 years), 2 of the post-war generations (mean age 27.0) and the estimate of 1.44 of the 1976s (mean age about 31). At the same time, the proportion of women without children doubled from 1950 (11.1%) to 1976 (21.8%, estimate). Women without children between 18 and 49 years are about 5.5 million, almost half of the women of this age group.

The aim of this paper is to explore the transition to adulthood, analysing reproductive behaviours. The approach adopted is by cohort parity. A special focus is devoted to characterize childless people.

Abstract *La genitorialità costituisce una tappa cruciale e una delle fasi più determinanti del ciclo di vita. Il momento in cui si realizza la transizione allo stato adulto ha subito forti variazioni attraverso le generazioni considerando distintamente due differenti aspetti, l'indipendenza abitativa e la formazione della famiglia. La posticipazione della maternità appare come una scelta razionale per le*

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donne per poter raggiungere un alto livello d'istruzione e una maggiore partecipazione nel mercato del lavoro, ma si può inserire anche in un più ampio cambiamento socioculturale e del sistema dei valori.

Contestualmente alla posticipazione della maternità, in Italia il tasso di fecondità totale sta rapidamente diminuendo, così come visibile dall'analisi per coorte. Il numero medio di figli per donna è passato dai 2,5 delle donne nate nei primi anni Venti (con un'età media al parto pari a 28,6) ai 2 delle generazioni successive alla seconda guerra mondiale (età media al parto di 27 anni) per arrivare a 1,44 figli per la generazione del 1976 (età media di 31 anni). Allo stesso tempo la proporzione di donne senza figli è raddoppiata dalla generazione del 1950 (11,1%) a quella del 1976 (stimata pari a 21,8%). Le donne senza figli tra 18 e 49 anni sono circa 5,5 milioni, quasi la metà delle donne di questa fascia di età.

L'obiettivo del lavoro è esplorare la transizione allo stato adulto, analizzando i comportamenti riproduttivi. L'approccio adottato è prevalentemente quello per coorte e un'attenzione particolare sarà dedicata alla caratterizzazione dei childless.

Key words: parenthood, cohort, postponement, childless

1 Introduction

Parenthood constitutes a crucial stage and one of the most challenging phases of the life cycle.

Timing of the transition to adulthood has changed across cohorts according to two different patterns, housing independence and family formation. The most recent cohorts are characterized by increasing school leaving age and delayed entry into the labour market and these delays show a strong effect in the postponement of the steps towards family formation. Postponement of childbearing appears as a rational choice to assure higher educational level (van de Kaa, 1987), labour market participation, but it refers also to a change of values, as an issue linked to gender equity, housing conditions and economic uncertainty.

Referring to childbearing, when a pronounced postponement is taking place, as it is now happening in Italy, the average number of children per woman is rapidly lowered. Because of the impact of changing in the timing of births, a clearer picture of fertility emerges when analysing the cohort trends.

During the latest fifty years women enter in motherhood at increasingly later ages. The delay in childbearing (Kohler, Billari, Ortega, 2002, Sobotka 2004) has an effect for many women to remain childless, delay childbearing at ages when women's fecundity is already in decline (te Velde, Pearson, 2002, te Velde *et al.*, 2012).

2 Aims, data and methods

The aim of this paper is to explore the transition to adulthood, analysing reproductive behaviours. The approach adopted is by cohort parity. A special focus is devoted to characterize childless people.

To describe the general Italian context about fertility most recent data on births are considered. These individual data refer to all births enrolled in the Italian resident population register; through this register it's possible to obtain information on births according to a set of demographic variables about the newborn and their parents. Moreover, to adopt a time series perspective it is worthwhile to analyse data contained in the Italian Fertility Database (IFD), a database built and maintained by the Italian Institute of Statistics (Istat). The IFD contains data on births of the resident population since 1952 and it is updated each year with data drawn from other Istat sources. Data are available at NUTS-2 level and by cohort of mothers (the first complete cohort is referred to 1933). These data underwent several rounds of adjustments, specific for different periods, which allowed reconstructing data by birth order.

The cohort approach seems to be particularly suitable to describe differential characteristics of women. The idea is to put in comparison some specific birth cohorts to single out the different attitudes and the main effects of the timing-quantum interaction.

Using data of the last Italian Multipurpose Household Survey "Families, social subjects and life course" (FSS), carried out by Istat in 2016, it is possible to shed light on reproductive behaviours and choices, considering the main individual socio-demographic characteristics of people and the crucial steps of their life cycle.

In order to study the factors influencing these different paths and family behaviours, the analysis draws differential profiles of childless and childfree people.

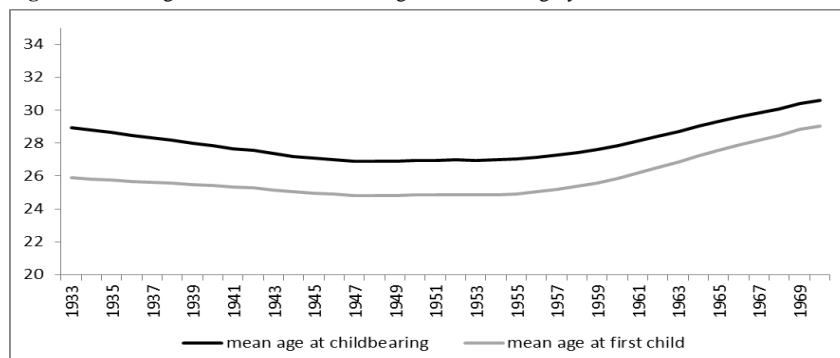
3 The cohort approach: *timing and quantum*

The decision of fulfilling the reproductive process is very important in the life history of a parent, as it indicates a long-term project that involves not only the parents but also their descendants. This decision arrives later and later in Italy passing from one cohort to another. This postponement is clearly visible observing the increase in mean age at first child and consequently at childbearing (Figure 1).

The general idea is to verify if the postponement lead to a recovery due to the most recent cohorts compared to the older ones, as observed in some other countries (e.g. Norway, Sweden or Western Europe countries). Theoretically the late-starters in most recent cohorts could achieve slightly more children than the late starters in the earlier cohorts (Berrington, Stone and Beaujouan, 2015). However this recovery does not counterbalance, in the Italian case, the collapse in fertility affecting younger

ages in most recent cohorts. Across generations to show a deep change it is not only the timing but also the quantum.

Figure 1: Mean age at first child and mean age at childbearing by mothers' cohort



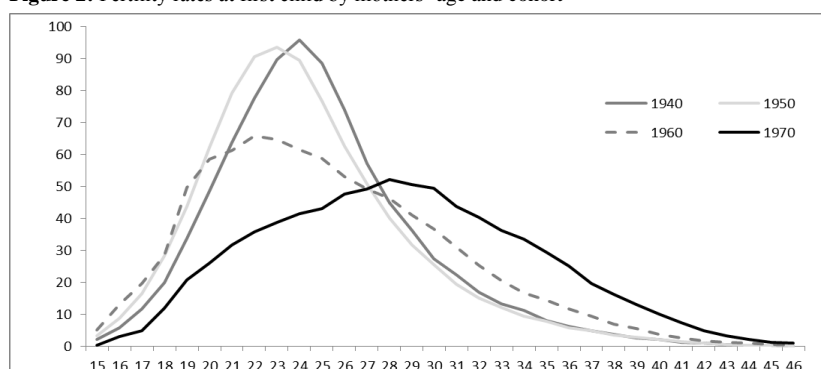
Source: Istat

The average number of children per woman in Italy decreases and the mean age at childbearing shows a U-shaped pattern: from 2.5 in the early 1920s cohort (mean age at childbearing 28.6 years), to 2 of the post-war generations (mean age 27), to the estimate of 1.44 of the 1976 cohort (mean age about 31).

A noticeable decrease in fertility necessarily entails profound modifications in terms of composition of the offspring by birth order. The fertility rates referring to the births of the first order have undergone a relatively limited variation, at least up to the generations of women in the mid-1960s: from 0.89 first children for 1950 women to 0.87 for 1965 cohort. For younger cohorts, more evident changes are observed. As a matter of fact, the proportion of women without children doubled from 1950 (11.1%) to 1976 (21.8%, estimates).

The age profiles display a clear postponement attitude observing 1960 cohort and particularly 1970 cohort (Figure 2).

Figure 2: Fertility rates at first child by mothers' age and cohort



Source: Istat

The contribution of different cohorts led to only 464 thousand births estimated in 2017, over 22,000 less than 2015 and over 100,000 less than 2008 (commonly considered as the first year of the economic crisis). Economic crisis reflected significantly on family's formation. A new phase of decrease in the birth rate that started after 2008 shows a strong contraction of the first children, from 283.922 in 2008 to 227.412 in 2016.

The decline in births is partly due to the so-called "structural" effects induced by significant changes in the female population in the fertile age, conventionally set between 15 and 49 years. The effect of the age structure is responsible for almost three quarters of the difference in births observed between 2008 and 2016. The remaining share depends instead on the decrease in the propensity to have children (from 1.45 children per woman at 1.34).

Women have accentuated the postponement of reproductive experience towards advanced ages; compared to 1995, the year of minimum fertility (1.19 children on average per woman), the mean age at childbearing increases by almost two years, reaching 31.8 years; even the mean age at first child grows to 31 years in 2016 (almost three years more than in 1995).

The delay in childbearing is likely to be the cause for many women to remain childless; as a matter of fact, the postponement at later ages may become a renunciation in having children. As above mentioned, a part of childless women chose childlessness, so it has to be considered on one hand as a personal preference, and on the other hand motherhood postponement as a choice for career possibility or other life goals (Blossfeld, Hiunink, 1991, Andersson 2000, Kneale, Joshi 2008). In order to consider the personal choice in not having children, childlessness has to be studied as childfree condition (Houseknecht, 1979).

4 To be childless or childfree: similarities and peculiarities

The consistent increase in the number of women without children for the younger generations raises many questions about its interpretation and its impact on the future evolution of fertility. Is this an increase due to difficulties in carrying out family projects or adopting a different life model that does not envisage becoming a parent? Using data from the Italian survey "Families, social subjects and life course" it is possible to analyse childless women characteristics (Istat, 2017). Considering women aged between 18 and 49, the childless women are about 5 and a half million in 2016, 45.1% of the women of this age group. Considering men, almost 57.4% of them are childless in the same age group (around 7 million) (Istat, 2017). The younger they are the higher the proportion of people without children: over 55% of people younger than 35 have no children, this proportion decreases first for women (less than one to three is childless over 35 years old, while for men the same proportion is reached over 45 years old).

Among childless people, about 534 thousand declared that having children does not fit into their life project (equal to 2.2% of people 18-49 years old); for men the

rate is higher than for women (2.5% vs 1.8%), especially in the 35-44 age group (3.5% among men between 35 and 39 years and 2.9% of 40-44 year-olds). For women the most high is between 40-44 year-olds (2.8% say they do not have and do not want children) (Table 1).

These results show that the phenomenon of women (and couples) without children by choice is very limited in our country and that, conversely, the increase in the share of women without children are mostly due to obstacles to the implementation of family projects; the effect of the postponement that can be transformed into renunciation should not be overlooked with the approach of the most advanced ages of women's reproductive life.

Table 1: Childless and childfree people by gender and age (per 100 people with the same characteristics) - Year 2016

Gender	Age groups	Childless	Childfree
Male	18-24	98.4	2.7
	25-29	88.9	1.5
	30-34	64.6	1.9
	35-39	46.4	3.5
	40-44	32.3	2.9
	45-49	28.1	2.3
Female	18-49	57.4	2.5
	18-24	93.3	1.9
	25-29	73.9	1.6
	30-34	46.8	1.3
	35-39	27.6	1.4
	40-44	24.2	2.8
All	45-49	19.8	1.6
	18-49	45.1	1.8
	18-24	95.9	2.3
	25-29	81.7	1.6
	30-34	55.5	1.6
	35-39	37.1	2.4
	40-44	28.2	2.8
	45-49	24.0	2.0
	18-49	51.3	2.2

Source: Istat

Analysing the individual characteristics, as well known people with higher educational qualifications are less likely to have children (61.3% for males and 55.5% for females) compared to the lower educational level (49.4% for males and 34.0% for females). The highest quota of people that do not have parenthood in their life project is among men and women with university qualifications.

Among unemployed people there is the highest share of childless (64.5%) and childfree (3.2%). Reproductive projects of unemployed people change according to gender showing opposite patterns: the highest quota of childfree is for men (5.0%) whereas the lowest is for women (0.8%); in addition employed women register the highest proportion of childfree (2.5%).

The presence or absence of a partner has a significant impact on reproductive choices. Being single makes more likely to be childless or childfree (respectively 86.7% and 3.8%) as well as having a partner with whom one is not cohabiting (84.8% and 3.0%); these are all elements that characterize people who do not have children and do not intend to have children, because they do not fit into their life projects, to a greater extent if they are men.

Besides the sentimental situation, the role that these people play in their family provides information on the relapse that the phase of the life cycle has on parental planning. People living alone are less likely to be a parent or plan parenthood (respectively 80.0% and 4.9%).

In a gender perspective, 77.9% of single men have no children and 5.5% do not plan fatherhood, because the idea does not fit with their life's plans. On the other hand among women there are higher shares of childless for singles (83.5%) and childfree when they do not have core relationship within a family (9.1% and 4.3% of women in a couple without children).

5 Conclusion and future developments

The childless population shows a high degree of heterogeneity (Tocchioni, 2017). Only a part plans never to have children (Tanturri and Mencarini 2008), and not all of them do not change idea across time (Moore, 2017).

To draw the profiles of different categories of people without children a logistic model will be applied to estimate the probability to be childfree vs childless (not childfree). The analysis will focus on women and men who are at least 35 years old at the time of the interview, considering only people who had already 'crossed' their most fecund period.

Main covariates to be included in the model are: socio-demographic characteristics, type of couple, support networks, economic and health conditions. An important covariate is the education level; as a matter of fact, education plays an important role in the reproductive behaviour.

The phenomenon of postponement of childbirth is even more evident for mother with a high educational level, thus causing an overlap or, sometimes, an inversion of family making steps. These different paths to parenthood could be the focus of further analyses exploiting FSS data 2016 edition.

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