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Descriptive Finding

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Economic reasons for not wanting a second child: Changes before and after the onset of the economic recession in Italy

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Abstract

OBJECTIVE

This study aims to understand changes in the fertility intentions of mothers residing in Italy before and after the onset of the economic recession. It focuses particularly on mothers with one child – a group whose intentions changed over the period – and especially on those who, before and after the economic crisis of 2007–2008, cite economic reasons for intending not to have a second child.

METHODS

The analysis uses data from the ISTAT sample survey on births and mothers and fits logistic regressions (for 2002 and 2012), with economic vs. other reasons for intending not to have a second child as the dependent variable, in order to compare the associated sociodemographic profiles of mothers for the two years.

RESULTS

In Italy, between 2002 and 2012, the fertility intentions of mothers with one child changed. The proportion intending to ‘stop at one’ increased, with more mothers giving economic constraints rather than personal preferences as their main reason for intending not to have another child. Moreover, socioeconomic differences among primiparous mothers reporting economic constraints as their main reason for intending not to have a second child narrowed, whereas age differences became more pronounced.

CONTRIBUTION

The study is one of the few that has examined the reasons behind fertility intentions, especially those of mothers intending not to have a second child. It shows that one important impact of the economic recession in Italy is that a greater proportion of

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primiparous mothers are now abandoning the two-child norm in response to adverse economic circumstances. As a consequence, Italy is likely to remain a low-fertility country for some time to come.

1. Introduction

Since the onset of the recent economic recession, several European countries have experienced a decline in their period fertility levels. In Italy, the total fertility rate fell from 1.46 children per woman in 2010 to 1.35 in 2015 (ISTAT 2016). The notion that economic hardship might lead individuals to revise or postpone their reproductive plans has been the subject of scholarly inquiry, and a number of studies have been carried out on the mechanisms through which the economic crisis might be affecting observed fertility levels in several Western countries (Cazzola, Pasquini, and Angeli 2016; Comolli 2017; Graham, Sabater, and Fiori 2016; Goldstein et al. 2013; Lanzieri 2013; Pailhé and Solaz 2012; Schneider 2015; Sobotka, Skirbekk, and Philipov 2011). Relatively little research, however, has been carried out on the ways in which economic recessions affect fertility intentions (Testa and Basten 2014), and even less attention has been paid to understanding the reasons behind intentions not to have a(nother) child.

This research gap might simply reflect a data shortage, as most large surveys do not ask respondents about their reasons for intending not to have children in the future. Nevertheless, analyses of the reasons for not wanting a(nother) child are important because they provide insights into the extent to which intentions are driven by preferences or shaped by constraints, thus enhancing our understanding of individuals' reproductive choices. A number of studies on childless respondents across Europe have highlighted preferences for a child-free lifestyle, partnership status, and adverse personal circumstances such as poor health and infertility problems as the main reasons behind intended childlessness (Miettinen and Pajaanen 2005; Sobotka and Testa 2008; Tanturri and Mencarini 2008). It is possible, however, that a different set of motivations influences the fertility intentions of women who already have one or more children.

This paper investigates the fertility intentions of women who already have one child and provides new empirical evidence by exploiting a unique dataset on mothers who recently had a child in Italy. This data allows the study of mothers' reasons for not wanting another child. We focus on primiparous mothers and explore the profiles of those who reported economic constraints as their main reason for intending not to have a second child. At the national level, the intended number of children has long been around two per woman in Italy (ISTAT 2009, 2014). The study of motivations behind a departure from this two-child norm at the individual level is therefore crucial for

understanding whether the reproductive plans of women who stop at one reflect their preferences for a smaller family or are shaped by adverse circumstances often beyond their control.

2. Data and methods

We use data from the ISTAT sample survey on births and mothers (ISTAT 2014). The survey was carried out in 2002, 2005, and 2012 on a large and representative sample of mothers who had given birth approximately 18 months before the interview. This dataset is the main source of information for studying the reproductive behaviour of mothers residing in Italy, as well as the socioeconomic context in which fertility intentions are formulated. All waves include a question on future fertility intentions but, more importantly, also ask mothers what their main reason is for intending not to have another child in the future.

We focus on women of parity one at the time of interview and analyse data for before 2002 and after 2012. We selected the 2002 (rather than the 2005) survey to represent the pre-crisis situation because Italy was already experiencing economic problems in the few years before the Great Recession (ISTAT 2005, 2009, 2011). To derive our analytical sample, we excluded women who were already pregnant with a second child at the time of interview and women who did not provide a definite yes or no answer to the question on fertility intentions, as these women were not asked about their reasons in every survey wave. Our final samples consist of 6,459 primiparous mothers in 2002 and 7,589 primiparous mothers in 2012.

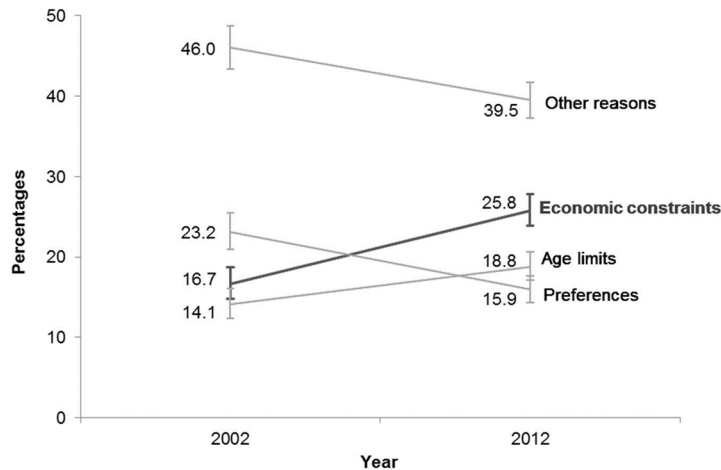
The first section of our study provides a descriptive comparison of the fertility intentions of women of parity one. We then focus on those with negative fertility intentions (1,359 mothers in 2002 and 1,881 mothers in 2012) and on their reasons for intending not to have a second child.

The second section concentrates on mothers whose reproductive plans are conditioned by their adverse economic situation, and whose proportion is likely to have increased following the onset of the recession. The original survey questions are recoded into a dichotomous dependent variable with the following categories: 1 = economic constraints, 0 = all other reasons. We use logistic regression to model the relationships between our dependent variable and the main sociodemographic characteristics of primiparous mothers with negative fertility intentions; separate models are fitted for 2002 and 2012.

3. Fertility intentions and the reasons for not wanting another child, 2002 and 2012

In line with a two-child norm, only around 20% of mothers with one child do not intend to continue their reproductive career. Nevertheless, the proportion of primiparous mothers with negative fertility intentions increased by nearly 4 percentage points, from 21% in 2002 to 24.8% in 2012 (t-test = 3.88, p-value <0.000). In the context of the recent economic downturn, ascertaining whether this increase is accompanied by a change in motivations is important for understanding the links between fertility and recession. We therefore investigate whether the motivations of the increasing proportion of primiparous mothers who do not intend to have a second child have changed over time.

Figure 1: Reasons for primiparous mothers intending not to have a second child, 2002 and 2012



Source: Authors' analysis of ISTAT sample survey on births and mothers.

Figure 1 shows that the negative fertility intentions of women with one child are justified by a range of motivations. Preferences (has achieved desired parity), age limits, and economic difficulties account for more than half of the reasons cited. The remaining mothers report a variety of other reasons, among which work and childcare issues, concerns about pregnancy, delivery or child-rearing, and health problems are the

most frequently cited. These other reasons are grouped because each is reported by only a minority of mothers.

The most noteworthy change shown in Figure 1 is in the relative importance of each reason. In particular, there is a significant increase from 16.7% to 25.8% (t-test = 4.63, p-value <0.000) in mothers of one child reporting economic constraints as the main reason for not intending to have a second child, which became the most cited reason in 2012. The proportion who felt they were too old to have another child also increased over time. Conversely, the proportion who said they had achieved their desired parity decreased, with this becoming the least frequently cited of the three main reasons.

4. Changing profiles of primiparous mothers who do not want another child due to economic constraints

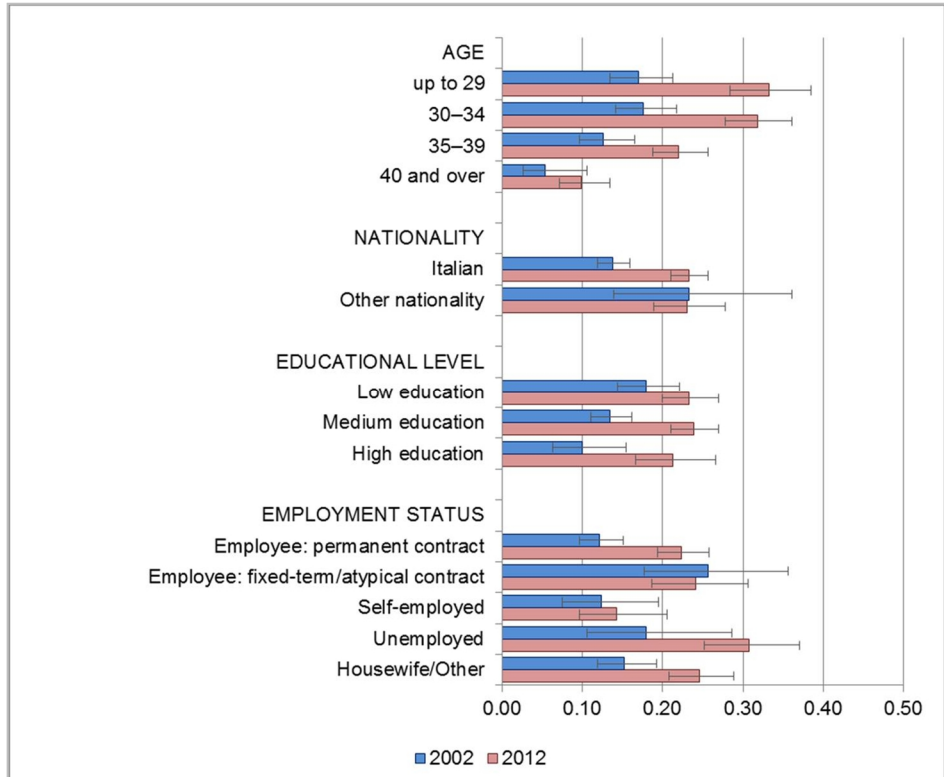
Our descriptive analysis suggests that the recession might have influenced the reproductive plans of primiparous mothers in Italy, with economic constraints becoming the single most important reason for not having a second child by 2012. The multivariate analysis therefore focuses on economic difficulties and compares the profiles of mothers citing this as the main reason for not having a second child before and after the economic crisis of 2007–2008. Results are graphically presented as predicted probabilities to allow direct comparison between 2002 and 2012 (Mood 2010).

4.1 Mothers' demographic and socioeconomic characteristics

Figure 2 displays predicted probabilities of reporting economic constraints as the main motivation for intending not to have a second child, according to mothers' personal characteristics. Consistent with the descriptive findings, between 2002 and 2012 the probabilities have increased for all mothers; the changes, however, have been particularly pronounced (and statistically significant) for some mothers.

Results show that women under 35 are more likely to cite economic difficulties and that this reason has gained in relative importance among younger compared to older women. It appears that fertility at younger ages is more influenced by adverse economic conditions, mainly because unemployment and job instability are more common in this age group, but also because younger mothers have more childbearing years left in which to revise fertility plans (Goldstein et al. 2013; Sobotka, Skirbekk, and Philipov 2011).

Figure 2: Primiparous mothers. Predicted probabilities of intending not to have another child for economic reasons, according to their demographic and socioeconomic characteristics



Source: Authors' analysis of ISTAT sample survey on births and mothers.

Differences between mothers of Italian and foreign nationality are not statistically significant, but the likelihood of Italian mothers reporting economic reasons for intending not to have a second child has increased significantly. A plausible explanation for the relatively smaller increase in the predicted probabilities for foreign mothers is that many of them are employed in the private care sector, which has been less affected by the economic crisis (ISTAT 2012).

Similarly, mothers with low educational qualifications and mothers who were in more precarious employment (fixed-term or atypical contracts) were more likely to report economic difficulties as the main reason for their fertility intentions in 2002. By

2012, however, significant educational differences have disappeared, as have the differences between those on permanent and fixed-term contracts, mostly because of the greater increase in probabilities among highly educated women and women in permanent employment. The probabilities of intending not to have a second child for economic reasons have also increased among housewives. Unemployed mothers in 2012 are the most likely to report economic constraints as their main motivation for not wanting another child, but differences between them and other mothers are mostly not significant.

4.2 Contextual influences: the household and beyond

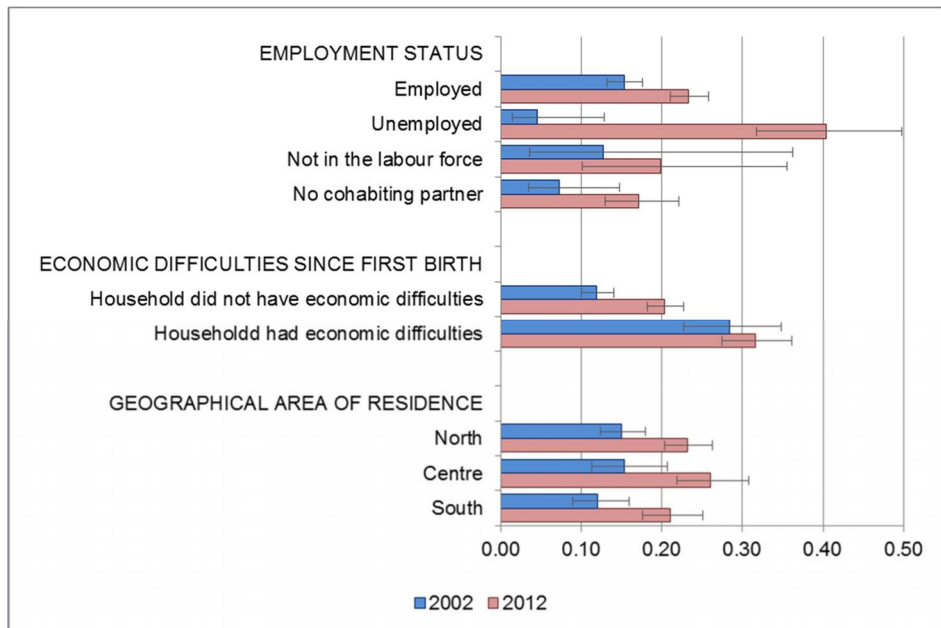
Our analyses have revealed that the probabilities of intending to stop after the birth of the first child have become more similar among women of different educational levels and employment statuses. At the same time, however, they also suggest that mothers' reproductive plans have become more dependent on their household's overall economic circumstances. The predicted probabilities of intending not to have a second child due to economic constraints according to household characteristics and geographical context are shown in Figure 3.

The distribution of mothers in our sample according to their partner's employment status indicates that in 2002 the vast majority (94.2%) could rely on the earnings of a partner. Ten years later the proportion of mothers who are sole earners has trebled from 2.3% to 6.6%, and that of mothers in no-earner households has increased from 3.4% to 8.2%. Figure 3 shows that, by 2012, the probabilities of intending not to have another child due to economic constraints have increased most for mothers whose partner is unemployed. Additional analyses interacting the employment status of both partners (not shown) reveal that differences among employed women have narrowed, especially within female-breadwinner households, and that the probabilities of nonemployed mothers reporting economic constraints as their motivation increased most for women in no-earner households. Further, in both 2002 and 2012, mothers whose households had experienced economic difficulties since the birth of the first child are more likely to report economic constraints as their motivation for intending not to have another child.

These findings reflect the general deterioration in the economic conditions of households in Italy following years of economic recession, and the consequent widespread sense of insecurity. The share of no-earner households has increased, and so has the proportion of households with a woman as the only breadwinner. In addition, nonstandard precarious employment contracts have become more common (ISTAT 2012). It is therefore not surprising that socioeconomic differences among employed women have narrowed, and that the fertility intentions of nonemployed mothers have

become more economically constrained. The reproductive plans of both groups of women seem to have been influenced by the deterioration of their partners' employment status, which often does not ensure sufficient economic security to plan for another child.

Figure 3: Primiparous mothers. Predicted probabilities of intending not to have another child for economic reasons according to the characteristics of their household and geographical context



Source: Authors' analysis of ISTAT sample survey on births and mothers.

A further consideration relates to contextual influences beyond the household level. There are no significant regional differences in the proportion of mothers whose fertility intentions are limited by economic constraints. Nevertheless, between 2002 and 2012 the probabilities of reporting economic difficulties as their main motivation for not having a second child increased more for mothers living in the centre of the country compared to those living in the north. Other scholars have highlighted the negative effect of the economic recession on fertility in the same region (Caltabiano, Comolli, and Rosina 2017).

5. Conclusions

Between 2002 and 2012, the proportion of primiparous mothers in Italy intending not to have a second child increased. The economic recession appears to have played a role in shaping their negative intentions, as the proportion of mothers who reported economic constraints as their main reason increased significantly.

This raises the interesting question of whether the increase in negative fertility intentions simply reflects the higher proportion of women experiencing economic hardship. Our findings suggest that it does not, but rather that it is also the consequence of a more pervasive feeling of insecurity which has affected the wider population, including those who have not been as severely hit by the crisis. Our results show a narrowing of socioeconomic differences, which indicates a greater increase in the propensity to avert risks associated with having another child among mothers with medium or high educational levels, and even among mothers with permanent employment contracts. At the same time, age differences have become more pronounced, mainly in response to the particularly adverse effect of the economic recession on younger individuals, suggesting that personal experience of economic difficulties may be more influential among younger women.

This study has focused attention on economic constraints which have emerged since the economic crisis as the most prominent reason for intending not to have a second child. A fuller picture could be gained by investigating other reasons for negative fertility intentions and by extending the analysis to consider changes in the reproductive plans of childless women as well as mothers of higher parities. Evidence on how socioeconomic inequalities in times of economic insecurity shape the reproductive plans of all women is key to understanding the mechanisms through which economic recession affects fertility. Caltabiano, Comolli, and Rosina (2017), for example, reported an increase in permanent childlessness due to the recession for medium-educated women. Descriptive insights from our data, on the other hand, reveal an increase in the proportion of mothers of two or more children intending to have another child, which appears to be mainly driven by the higher fertility intentions of foreign mothers. Further research could usefully explore the relative contribution of these diverse changes to overall fertility levels in Italy.

Italy has been a low-fertility country for more than two decades. Our findings suggest that the uncertainty brought about by the recent economic recession is likely to suppress fertility further as more (young) women 'stop at one.' This could mean that fertility will rise after economic uncertainties ease but, if the economic recession continues for some time, is more likely to result in lower completed family size for the generation of women affected. Future longitudinal research will be needed to examine

whether and when (in relation to a previous birth) women revise their reproductive plans in response to economic improvement.

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