Couples’ Career, Self-Selection, and Fertility in Italy
Carriere lavorative di coppia, orientamenti personali e fecondità in Italia

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Keywords: work, Italian fertility, couple’s context, self-selection

1. Introduction and objective

The degree of compatibility between the role of mother and the role of worker has to be regarded as a key feature when discussing the Italian lowest-low fertility. Besides, the gender system prevailing in a society is deeply related to the way these aspects are managed within the couple (Baizán, 2005). From this perspective, it is significant to analyse the labour force status of each partner within the couple, as fertility and labour force options are closely related. Few studies, however, have been focusing on the couple-level. This paper aims at investigating the impact of both partners’ labour force status on fertility outcomes. A number of social scientists are now emphasising the important role of attitudes in determining demographic behaviour. Here, the hypothesis of “Self Selection” in contemporary Italian fertility development is also tested. Namely, because the intensity of second and third birth concerns the selected group of women who already have one child, it can be advocated that this group has shown a preference for motherhood and committed to a child-oriented “life plan”. In order to investigate the “self-selection” hypothesis we will proceed by estimating the transition to the first, second and third child jointly, including a common unobserved heterogeneity factor, similarly to Kravdal (2001) and Kreyenfeld (2002). The study is based on a retrospective survey conducted in Italy by the Italian National Statistical Office (ISTAT) “Families and Social Subjects” (FSS) 2003.

2. Method

At the outset women’s chances to give birth to first, second and third births are studied separately through an event history model. The follow-up is the time elapsed since age 15, and up to age 45 in the first birth model; from previous birth, and up to age 45 in second and third birth models. Time to pregnancy (and not to birth) is measured in order to look closely at employment status when the woman got pregnant. For the specification of these baseline hazard durations we use a piecewise linear spline.

At a second step of the analysis, in order to investigate the hypothesis of self-selection, a simultaneous-equations model estimates jointly the three fertility equations, and a person-specific heterogeneity term is included in each equation.
3. The impact of work and self-selection

As regards the demographic control variables – birth cohort and age at marriage, age at first childbirth, and age at second childbirth respectively for the transition to first, second, and third child – are confirmed to be potent predictors of fertility changes. Looking at the area of residence, our estimates clearly confirm the well known North-South differential. Moreover, women’s educational level turned out to be an important factor influencing fertility model – progressively women’s with medium and then with high educational level are more prone to postpone the first, the second and the third child. The negative correlation between education and fertility in Italy is naturally explained assuming that women’s educational attainment represents a valid marker of her labour market chances as well as her wage. As expected, the analysis proves that women’s permanent or temporary employment has a strong negative impact on fertility outcomes. One of the main findings is therefore the confirmation of serious difficulties in combining motherhood and career. This negative impact on fertility is particularly pronounced in permanently employed women.

Moreover, the results proved that in a “male-breadwinner context” like Italy, the male partner earning potential (measured on his position in the labour market) fosters fertility, regardless of the modality of work. It shows that women’s employment and childbearing decisions are also determined by a series of external opportunities and constraints. This outcome is in line with the traditional micro-economic interpretation that emphasis the husband’s breadwinner capacity. After controlling for a common unobserved heterogeneity factor in each fertility transition, the significant (negative) impact of women’s employment on the probability of second and third birth is stronger. The interpretation of these results refers to the “self-selection hypothesis”. Namely, women giving birth to the second, and afterward to the third child, have already shown a preference toward motherhood during the life-course. This “selection effect” may particularly concern the role played by women’s employment on the probability of second and third birth under structural and/or institutional constraints. Namely, women who choose to set up a family in a not family-friendly institutional context such as the Italian one, should either have low career ambitions or a high family orientation. Thus, the impact of women’s work on Italian fertility development appears even more negative when it is not mitigated by women’s orientation toward childbearing.

References