

**FROM MOTHERS TO DAUGHTERS: INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION OF
FERTILITY NORMS**

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INTRODUCTION

Starting from the mid-1960s, family and fertility patterns in Europe underwent fundamental changes. In the course of a few decades the rapid decrease in the number of children born per woman and the dramatic increase in age at first birth modified considerably the life-course experience of women. Sociologists and socio-demographers have increasingly turned to intergenerational models to explain family behaviour (Kahn and Anderson 1992; Wu 1993). A number of studies show that there is a positive correlation between the fertility of parents and children, even in societies characterized by major changes in the timing of family-related events and in the occurrence of such events (Murphy Knudsen 2002, Bernardi and White 2010). There is a long record of correlations between mothers' and daughters' completed fertility in historical population studies.¹ Such empirical regularity in intergenerational correlations in fertility may reflect stability in family influences amid the dramatic cultural changes of post-war Europe. Part of the explanation for such continuity is that attitudes and meanings are transmitted from one generation to another and that intergenerational continuity generates life-course continuities in social behavioural and ideological systems (Putallaz et al. 1998).

In this Chapter I look at one important dimension of intergenerational continuities in fertility, namely normative beliefs about fertility choices between generations. Normative beliefs are important determinants of fertility behaviour. While norms are learnt and internalized throughout the life course, primary socialization of children

¹ These correlations range between 0.084 and 0.221, with the variation often related to the length of co-residence of parents and children (see, for instance, Pullum and Wolf 1991, Axinn et al. 1994, Murphy 1999, Barber 2000, Gagnon and Heyer 2001, Steenhof and Liefbroer, 2008, Liefbroer and Elzinga 2006).

within the family and role modelling are important mechanisms in ensuring norm transmission. In addition, interaction with family members in adult life may reinforce the effects of early socialization and role modelling.

In the following I focus on the ways in which mothers and their daughters explain and make sense of normative beliefs about childbearing. I draw on set of semi-structured interviews with women of reproductive age and their mothers, collected in Italy between 2004 and 2006. The chapter provides first a micro-level descriptive analysis of normative beliefs about childbearing norms in mother–daughter dyads. Linking these descriptive analyses to the biography of specific couples of mothers and daughters, I identify patterns of continuity and discontinuity in the social meaning of children and their fertility outcomes.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRANSMISSION AND FERTILITY

The intergenerational transmission of norms and values about parenthood across generations produces some degree of continuity in attitudes and behaviour regarding family formation. I use values in the sense of beliefs about what is significant and desirable to achieve in relation to parenthood, childbearing and childrearing. Norms, though certainly related to values, constitute rules for behaviour. We can distinguish three types of norm: permissive norms define what is considered to be acceptable or admitted behaviour; proscriptive norms define what behaviour has to be avoided; and prescriptive norms define what is best to be done or what is the necessary behaviour. Children may adopt their parents' family and fertility values and norms through various mechanisms, some of which act in a direct manner, like those involved in conscious

socialization efforts by parents (socialization mechanisms for values and norms), and some of which are indirect (role modelling) or mediated by behaviour (status inheritance).

Value and norms socialization mechanisms occur when parents use explicit socialization techniques like support and control to make their children adopt what they believe to be an appropriate behaviour. Parents may use material or emotional punishments and rewards (Smith 1988). For instance, they may express their disagreement with a given mode of behaviour. The quality of the social ties between parents and children affects the likelihood that the latter will comply with parents' norms and values (Axinn and Thornton 1992, Schröder 2009). Parents' beliefs and values are assumed to be particularly important during all the phases of the transition to adulthood, when young people need to make choices, each of which could lead them on to a different pathway.

Role-modelling mechanisms are involved when mother's and father's roles are reproduced by the children through passive internalization (Campbell 1969, Chodorvo 1978, Holden and Zambarano 1992), Parental beliefs about discipline and parenting may be transmitted through disciplinary practices and the level of supportive parenting (Simons et al. 1992). In this case it is the behaviour that is reproduced, and individuals formulate beliefs that are consistent with their parenting practices when they themselves become parents.

Mediating mechanisms like status inheritance may add up to direct or indirect transmission of preferences and behaviour. Similar attitudes and values among parents

and children may be the consequence of the fact that they share a common social position (Bengston 1975) so that their life course is likely to be structured by similar sets of opportunities and constraints. For instance, the educational or employment career would strongly structure the timing and modalities of his or her family formation and fertility. If structural conditions change dramatically or if intergenerational social mobility is high, the effects of status inheritance are low despite close relationships between parents and children. This is another reason why we may observe differences between parents and daughters' modes of behaviour and attitudes, even though their relationships are close.

The mechanisms mentioned above are likely to produce attitudes and values among children that are similar to those of their parents. Yet, there are several ingredients that mediate in particular socialization and role-modelling mechanisms in the production of intergenerational continuities. Such ingredients include the proximity between parents and children during childhood, the quality of their affective relationship, the quality of the mother's experience of her role, her recollection of it, and the presence or absence of conflict among family members (Boyd 1989). Qualitative evidence that the structure of interpersonal interaction and communication can play a major role in individual understandings of fertility ideals and intentions is further suggestive of the importance of the intensity of interactions between kin (Bernardi 2003, Bernardi et al. 2005, Bernardi and Oppo 2008).

This top-down socialization model, on which most of the studies reviewed here are based, has been the object of criticism (Connell 2009). Nevertheless, it constitutes a

useful theoretical starting point to think about continuity and change in fertility-related norms through the generations. The analysis of mother–daughter interviews shows that socialization is all but a linear and regular process proceeding diachronically from mothers to daughters. When it comes to family and fertility issues, the complexity of the ways in which norms are transmitted may take the form of some inconsistency between the mother’s experience of fertility and the wish she has for her daughter’s experience of motherhood. Alternatively, it may express itself in various forms of resistance to specific behavioural norms of the mother’s by the daughter, who nonetheless pursues the same values of her mother while needing to adapt her specific choices to a changed environment. Lastly, complexity materializes itself in the multidirectional flows of influences, which flow from mothers to daughters but also in the opposite direction.

While in other life-course domains like education and employment, formal criteria regulate the occurrence of transitions from one state to another, the age structuring of family transitions is mostly left to the informal regulation of social norms (Stettersten 2003). Whether implicit or explicit mechanisms are involved, shared norms regulating the occurrence and timing of fertility are crucial in shaping the content of what is passed on in intergenerational exchanges. In the following I shall look at two kinds of norms about family size: age at first birth, and the appropriate sequencing of the transition to parenthood in relation to other life-course events and statuses. I shall distinguish prescriptive norms (indicating what is preferably done) and proscriptive norms (indicating what should not be done). I shall highlight the similarities and differences across generations, and between single mother–daughter dyads, in the content of such norms. Further following an interpretative approach, I shall examine the ways in which

mothers and daughters contextualize their normative beliefs with references to values about parenthood and children.

The empirical basis for the chapter is a corpus of 36 semi-structured interviews with childless women of reproductive age and their mothers collected in four cities in Italy (18 mother–childless daughter dyads).² All the interviews were collected between 2004 and 2006 and are part of larger study on low fertility rates in Italy, where 240 women of all parities (from childless women to mothers of 4) , as well as their mothers and (when possible) their partners, were interviewed.

Table X.1 in the appendix summarizes the basic socio-demographic characteristics of these mothers and daughters, like age, marital status, educational achievement and employment status at the time of the interview, as well as number of children (for the mothers only).

By means of comparative content analysis, I contrasted values and norms (permissive, prescriptive and proscriptive norms) about the number of children, the age at birth for mothers, and the age interval between children held by mother and daughter in each dyad and then across dyads.

CONTEXT OF THE STUDY

Italian fertility decline was already evident in the early 1990s, when the period indicator

² The data come from the project Explaining Low Fertility in Italy (ELFI), supported by grants from the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (R01 HD048715) and the National Science Foundation (BCS 0418443).

recorded levels below 1.3, but the cohort fertility of women born in the mid-1960s and early 1970s was also substantially lower than that of the generation of their mothers in most Italian regions (Barbogli et al. 2003). These very low birth rates took many population experts by surprise (Chesnais, 1998), given the dominant presence of the Catholic Church and the country's strong familial values, where 'traditionally the family group has had priority over the individual' (Reher, 1998). A number of explanations have been given for the rapidly falling fertility in Italy. The rapid increase in women's labour force participation, combined with lagging societal adjustments, would have increased claims on mothers' time and energy and caused a delay in the transition to first birth and a reduction family size. The mismatch between the gender equity promoted in the public sphere and the gender asymmetries in the roles of men and women with children in the private sphere would have produced a strong disincentive to motherhood (McDonald 2000). A third and key explanation for the drop in fertility in Italy is the intensity of intra-family relations in the country. In particular, the long co-residence of parents and adult children and the related expectations of intense parental support for adult children have been cited as depressing the childbearing intentions of the younger generations. 'Too much family', in the words of the leading Italian demographer, Massimo Livi Bacci, will contribute to a unhealthy postponement of the responsibility of parenthood in a context characterized by insufficient opportunities for young adults' employment and housing (Livi Bacci 2001, Dalla Zuanna 2001). The historical importance of intergenerational relations and family exchanges in Italy is well documented (Reher 1998). Data from a recent international comparative survey of intergenerational transfers shows that monetary transfers from parents to children and children's care of their elderly parents happens less often in Italy

than in the rest of continental Europe (Albertini et al. 2007). Yet, as this is due to the long co-residence of Italian adult children with their parents, the authors conclude: ‘co-residence is the Southern European way of transferring resources from parents to children and vice versa’ (Albertini et al. 2007, p. 326). On the one hand, the long co-residence of parents and adult children allows for the fact that support for economic transfers and care services is not limited to relations between parents and children, but involves also collaterals like siblings, uncles, and aunts (Bernardi and Oppo 2008). On the other hand, the fact that co-residence implies daily contacts means that exchanges are not limited to resources, but extend to conversations about and participation in personal life courses, such as tertiary education, employment and partnership choices (Bernardi and Oppo 2011).

DATA AND METHODS

Childless women of reproductive age (between 23 and 38) were chosen because on the one hand they are living the life-course stage in which fertility decision-making becomes relevant, while on the other hand their normative beliefs about whether and when to have children, or how many children to have, have not yet been moderated by their own fertility experience. Their average age difference from their mothers was 28.2 years. Almost all daughters (fifteen out of eighteen) were university-educated or students (this is not surprising, since we selected a sample of childless women whose median age is 28; the probability that there are more childless women among them is high given the later onset of family formation for more highly educated women). All women in the daughter sample were employed or in education, and all those who were studying had little jobs on the side. Their relationship situation was also rather

heterogeneous: six were engaged but lived either alone or with their parents, three were married, and the remaining nine were cohabiting with their current partner.

There was substantial variation in the mother sample as well. Their ages ranged between 44 and 75 in the most extreme cases, though the majority were aged between 55 and 65 (the median sample age is 59). Only five mothers were university educated, eight of them went through compulsory education at most, and five continued until their secondary school diploma. As far as their labour participation is concerned, mothers were relatively evenly distributed between those who had never worked outside the home or had only little jobs (five), those who stopped working with the arrival of the first or subsequent children (five), and those who continued to work after becoming mothers (eight). Divorce affected four of the eighteen mothers, while the remainder were all married to their first husbands and thus the fathers of the daughters we interviewed. Their average number of children is 2.3, with five of them having had the interviewed daughter as their only child. The average of the individual differences between the mothers' age at first birth and that of the daughters at the moment of the interview was 4.4 years. In other words, if the daughters had fallen pregnant on the day of the interview, they would have their first child five years later than their mother had hers.

ESSENTIAL NORMATIVE BELIEFS ABOUT FERTILITY QUANTUM AND TIMING

Norms about whether to have children

Norms about childlessness as a life choice are polarized. Either it is acceptable or it is to be avoided. There is no difference in the way in which these two opposite positions are expressed by mothers and daughters belonging to these groups. One position associates marriage with family and family with children. Choosing voluntary childlessness is consistent with staying unmarried, but not with forming a couple. Religiosity and adherence to the Catholic Church's conception of marriage as family and of motherhood as responsibility are explicitly mentioned in a few interviews (Bb07d and Bp20d). Together with the idea that children are the purpose of marriage, women voice the priority of the mother role for the woman who decides to marry and have children and the importance of home-based childcare in the first three years of the child. These two prescriptive norms are consistent with an expressed lack of interest in a possible career (Bb07). A strong family network should also be present to reconcile work schedules and home-based childcare. If the current employment is demanding or the family network comes under strain, these same prescriptions may lead to postponement or foregoing of motherhood (Bp20d). Despite fertility outcomes being different, the value logic behind it is the same: marriage and children are related and a duty. Mothers often add to this equation the fact that marriage means 'sacrifice' and 'patience'.

Yet, despite the strong views mentioned above, most women do not share proscriptive norms about childlessness. While only one mother and daughter dyad does not seem to desire children (grandchildren), most of them are also inclined to be permissive with respect to childlessness. Viewed as a second-best alternative, childlessness is accepted as a consequence of life-course circumstances: the lack of an appropriate partner, disillusion

regarding social developments, individual practical bottlenecks and demanding careers are reasons which may be acceptable to give up motherhood. Only a couple of women saw childlessness as a more positive decision to be taken in favour of preserving their or their daughters' current freedom and autonomy, which would be lost with a lifelong relationship with a dependent child: '(with a child) you stop living' (Bb01d). Women in this group were either single children or the children of mothers who were divorced or who had sacrificed much of their personal lives for the family. Apart from these exceptions, most women in both the younger and older generation agreed that childlessness would deprive the couple of experiencing an affective and relational dimension to the family. Care and reciprocal support among family members are implied with the arrival of a child in a context where most of the care of children until they reach the age of three is provided by grandmothers. Caring for children in such context is therefore loaded with meanings that go beyond its functional role. It is a means by which the sense of family itself is constructed. Affection, discipline, habits and knowledge transmitted to the children are also passed on to other family members that enter into relations with them. When respondents said that at least one child was necessary 'to create a family', they were more or less consciously expressing two different concepts. One is that children are the fulfillment of individuals and couples, but also of the larger family group, who become uncles, aunts and grandparents according to their relationship with the child. The second is that the expression of caring for children becomes a time for family creation and family identity (Bernardi and Oppo 2008).

Norms about the number of children

A shared norm among mothers and daughters concerned the choice of having just one child. Disagreement over such a choice was expressed either through a proscription on only children or through a milder prescription in favour of having more than one child. The proscriptions against having only one child were generally motivated by preoccupations towards the child who may grow up with too much attention and therefore be 'spoiled', whose social development may be negatively limited by the lack of interaction with other children, and who may feel lonely. Maria Luisa, a mother of three children (Bb01m), expressed a strong proscription against having single children. She drew on her several years of experience as a primary school teacher to express a fear of the negative consequences of being single mothers of only children: 'the worse is the only children of single mothers or of separated mothers, who stay just with their mothers, and the mothers of these kids put on them... it is like they would like to be protected by this child, who needs to grow up ahead of time, and these children grow up with a terrible anxiety'. In addition to the consequences for the child, most women argued that having more than one child should be prescribed for the beneficial effects on the mother. Carla (Cp08d), a 32-year-old woman who herself has two other sisters, said: 'I see that the more children you have the more you are serene, you do not have these possessive mothers, they are much more relaxed, much more. I have the tendency to be a little anxious, I see it at work, I am quite apprehensive and I would not like this to fall on my child (...) and it is more enriching, more stimulating'.

When the desired family size was greater than two, the women did not talk anymore in terms of norms but of preferences. The shift of register was clearly indicated by the fact

that, instead of insisting on how the chosen family size would benefit the children, the mother or their relationship (prescription), the arguments in favour of three or four children were justified rather by referring to their experience in the family of origin (preference). This was the case when the woman had one or more siblings herself, in which case she may want to reproduce a positive experience with the family configuration of her own children. Experience in the family of origin was also a strong motivation for women who either suffered from a lack of companionship in childhood (as only children or as children with significant age gaps from their siblings) or from a lack of close siblings when they needed help themselves with childrearing or with caring of older parents later in life.

Norms about the timing of the transition to parenthood: age and sequencing

The *age norms* are socially shared expectations about the proper age (or age range) at which the transition to motherhood should occur. Often individuals express them as upper or lower age limits at childbirth. Childbearing in later ages is more pronounced in countries where norms related to mother's age at childbearing are changing and when having children later in life is culturally approved (Morgan 1991). It has been argued that flexible and loose age norms are the reasons for changes in the timing of childbearing (Castro Martin 1992, Rindfuss et al. 1996, Stettersten and Haegstad 1996). The mothers and daughters in my sample were divided between those who had strong beliefs about the right age to become parents and those who preferred to shift the conversation to matters of maturity and responsibility not particularly related to a specific age. When ages were specified, the variation in the specific ages was large. The specific minimal and maximal ages mentioned varied from fifteen to forty. Woman's

biology was mentioned as forcing specific and inevitable considerations of an upper age limit after which becoming pregnant is rare if not impossible. Yet, curiously none of the women mentioned that the mother's advanced age may mean a higher risk for the child being born with serious malformations as a reason to have children earlier. Rather, rationales were offered in relation to interaction with the children: a younger mother would have more energy to raise small children, the mentality gap between old parents and their children may hurt their mutual understanding during the child's adolescence and youth, and a not so young mother is equilibrated mentally with herself.

The justifications for the specific ages that were mentioned made reference to the biographical experiences of both mother and daughters. The older the daughter, the older are the minimal and maximal ages mentioned by mothers and daughters, in a clear adaptation of norms to behaviour. If the mother regretted her own young and naively sought motherhood, the daughter was more likely to hold norms which push towards later ages. The basic argument here was not material security, but personal stability and equilibrium. Barbara (Cp04d) was the thirty-year-old daughter of Pina (Cp04m). Her mother had been withdrawn from school by her parents, who wanted her to stay at home or learn sewing. In order to leave an oppressive parental home, she got pregnant by a man she hardly knew and was married at nineteen. She had two daughters and repeatedly interrupted her pregnancies to limit family size, instead of preventing conception. She lived with her husband for twenty years in permanent conflict, mostly concerning their daughters' education and the use of the household's scarce economic resources. After suffering from severe depression, she divorced her husband when her daughters reached their majority. She repeated over and over again in her interview that

she ‘was not in control of her life when she was young’. Her daughter Barbara indicated a proscription on becoming mother below thirty and a prescription to do so before 35 in order to make sure that one has the necessary ‘maturity’. She also insisted on her wish to have children only within marriage and only after having cohabited with a partner in order to get to know him well, since ‘I want him to have the same principles as myself, I want him to agree with the kind of education that the child should be given’. It is hard to ignore the mother’s experience and her way of recalling it as an important reason for her daughter to have strong views about the timing of childbearing.

Barbara’s views about age norms also illustrate a typical case of a respondent who gives a biographical age as a proxy for a sequencing norm. What counted for her is that motherhood should occur *only after* a certain individual and couple reach maturity, which she associates with a given age. *Sequencing norms* indicate the order in which events and statuses should follow themselves in life. Sequencing norms related to childbearing therefore indicate what should be the right order in which to have a child conditional on other life-course achievements. Are there shared proscriptive and prescriptive norms about whether childbirth should precede or follow cohabitation, marriage, the ending of education, a stable employment, independent housing, and so on? And what are the permissive norms about the inversion or the synchronic occurrence of such statuses and transitions?

Sequencing norms were mentioned and justified more vigorously than norms related to age. One group of justifications for specific prescriptions and proscriptions were related to concerns about the place that the child will have in the couple’s relationship, as well

as its material and emotional security. In order to give stability to the future family, the couple should evolve, fine-tuning their own relationship by experiencing cohabitation and daily interactions. Therefore a universally shared norm is that the couple needs a period of cohabitation before having a child. A second group of norms concerned the possibility for the couple to ensure a minimal level of material well-being for the children. Often this was translated into waiting until at least one member of the couple has a stable income, waiting until housing conditions are affordable, waiting until career perspectives are clarified and so on. The question is what is the stability of such sequencing norms when the relevant life-course conditions that are considered to be preconditions for childbearing do not change and time passes by? To what extent are norms binding? Is there a normative adaptation or does the perspective becomes one of childlessness? As I will illustrate in the following section on transmission mechanisms, family biographical experiences seem to matter in this process.

While the norms that I have described so far cut across generational groups, there are two major differences between mothers and daughters which should be given attention. One difference is that, contrary to daughters, mothers can dissociate their behaviour from the norms they declared they held at the time of the interview. Mothers and daughters are living in different life-course phases when they are asked to declare their beliefs. Mothers are at the end of their reproductive lives, and daughters have not yet started them. In addition they have a different role towards each other by definition (achieved autonomy for the childless daughter and long life career for the mother). Mothers adapted their normative beliefs to their own actual experience *ex post*. Secondly, they adapted the normative principles that guided their choices twenty to

thirty years earlier to what they understood as a changed context for the fertility decisions of their daughters. Finally, in conversations they negotiated over their daughters' proscriptions and prescriptions, partially to come closer to the current life course situations and family formation of their daughters. This latter process was what Rosa was going through, facing the possibility that her daughter would have children in cohabitation: 'slowly adapting, I need to be honest, with quite some effort given my education, my age, my religiosity, I think I will be sad but little by little I am getting used to it, through other people's stories. We need to manage to understand this as well' (Bp01m). Luisa summarized this well by saying: 'We (the parents) desire what they (the children) desire' (Cb04m).

The second difference seems to be due to a combination of biographical experience and the historical changes that have occurred in the thirty years which separated the mothers, born between the 1940s and the 1950s, from their daughters, born in the mid-1970s to the 1980s. In the mothers' interviews a norm 'of sacrifice' related to having children was recurrent. The sacrifices that mothers refer to were mostly gendered, in the sense that each gender was seen as making a specific form of sacrifice, but they applied to men as well as women. Women sacrifice in keeping together a bad marriage at some cost to themselves while the children are small or giving up their educational or professional aspirations to cope with the family's needs. Men sacrifice by working longer and harder, by reducing their consumption needs if this is economically necessary. The thirty years between the two generations witnessed higher levels of women's education and labour force participation, as well as levels of cohabitation and partnership dissolution in Italy. The shift expressed by mothers and daughters alike

towards the acceptability of later ages at childbirth and of smaller family sizes take into account the need for the younger women to participate actively in this change. In the daughters' interviews the word 'sacrifice' came more often with reference to their mothers' experiences than to their own expectations of what is implied by having children. If there is sacrifice, it is a sacrifice of free time and freedom to be spontaneous in organizing one's daily life.

PATTERNS OF NORMATIVE TRANSMISSIONS

In this section, I draw on the comparative analysis of single dyads to show a few emblematic cases of normative transmission between mothers and daughters. The role of these cases is to illustrate the complexity involved in normative transmissions and the complexity with which they may or may not also result in the transmission of fertility outcomes between mothers and daughters. Explicit socialization, implicit role modelling and status inheritance are all involved in different degrees in such cases. In all cases, mothers and daughters share a number of internalized norms and basic values, which makes them a coherent guide to fertility and more in general family formation. In the first cases, the norms tend to larger family sizes and relatively early childbearing within a context of intense kinship exchanges. In contrast, the second set of cases illustrates normative family environments in which children are not crucial in the definition of a couple and the woman's realization outside her mother and wife roles compete with the children.

Children as family

Giuseppina (Bb07m) was a southern Italian family farmer until she moved to northern Italy at the age of nineteen following an older brother; she became a nurse, and, despite a marriage at 22 and two daughters born shortly after the marriage, she continued working as a hospital nurse until her retirement. She stopped at two children since she had no mother or in-laws available to help, but really she would have wanted three children. Her husband's support was not sufficient to run the household, given that she needed to work as well. She educated her daughters to be responsible and obedient. She advised them to wait and know their partners well before marrying 'because marriage is not a promenade; young people nowadays, even for a small problem, say "I quit", while one also needs to submit oneself, understand whether she is making mistakes, one needs to think it over before taking a step like that. (...) Marriage is patience and fatigue (...) I always told off my husband in my head, in silence'. Giuseppina lives in the village of origin of her husband, surrounded by her in-laws and her older daughter with the latter's two children. The grandchildren are taken care of by Giuseppina, who alternates with their paternal grandmother while the daughter works in the morning. The daily practice of intense family exchanges together with a sincere religious upbringing are the common guiding threads in her family life and her normative orientation for social behaviour, including fertility.

Simona (Bb07d) is the younger daughter, aged 32, a nurse and recently married to a doctor. They lived separately and invested in his career (hers is not important) during their five years of engagement while he was studying and she already worked, so that they could marry and live together when he could earn the family income and live in a house given to him by his parents. Her relational life is centred on the village, where all

her own family, her partner's family and her friends live. She has strong relationships with her sister and her children. When they married, her husband started working, and now they have had the time 'to test' their living together, she feels ready to try to have the first child and plans trying to conceive actively. She would never have considered cohabitation or having children outside of marriage. In her own words, having children 'change your life, it's a responsibility, you are not at the centre anymore, and there is this human being that needs to be cared for, raised, needs to be taught many things (...) it is a matter of mental maturity'. She would nevertheless like to have up to three children if possible but may be happy with two, while she thinks that only one child would have allowed her to reproduce her 'happy family experience'.

Giuseppina's experience of family is very similar to that to her first daughter and to the one that Simona not only expects but has been patiently building for a few years. The continuity in their family's normative guidelines and practices is very evident. Despite the six years of difference in the onset of childbearing between the mother and her daughters, relatively speaking their timing of births has been very similar: they both had children just below the average age at birth of their respective generations, one of the daughters has already reached her mother's family size, and the second intends to have at least as many children as her mother.

Other experiences of strong intra-family aid where socialization into a given set of values has been explicit and is monitored by repeated interactions (though there are no sanctions explicitly mentioned in case of non-compliance) leads to different outcomes concerning fertility and discontinuity between generations. These are the cases of Lia

(Bp18d) and Eliana (Bp20d) and their respective mothers. Lia and Eliana come from similar family structures and received an education comparable to that of Simona, the only difference being that their mothers did not work and their fathers were not involved in family care. Both Lia's and Eliana's mothers are poorly educated and stayed at home with the children, working occasionally from home. This difference in role modelling by a mother at home seems to play an important role in the gap the two young women feel between their family aspirations and their parallel engagement in jobs of responsibility. Both daughters have grown up with high expectations concerning the role of children in family life ('they make you go back to the essence of life', says Lia), the educational role of mothers against the external childcare options ('I never thought of child care'; 'you build a relationship with the children everyday'), and a desire to have a family of three, as in their experience. They are both very much involved in their aunt's role and relatively pessimistic about their chances actually to form any family at all. Lia's mother, reflecting on two of her three daughters' family situations, wondered whether 'teaching them strong values was a good idea', since while she appreciates that they are 'united and supportive of each other', she also realizes that their values are not well adapted to the more varied demands of the marriage market.

Children as self-realization

Franca (Bp26m) was an only child herself and had one daughter, Loredana (Bp26d), when she was married at 28. She has a professional diploma as an accountant and had worked since obtaining it, slowly changing to part time in the last few years and retiring

the year before the interview. She lived all her life below her parents, and could enjoy all their help when her child was young. She went back to work as soon as her maternity leave ended ('I did not like to be at home, I felt I was in a cage during the maternity leave'), though she had never been interested in a career ('which would have meant selling her soul to the firm, so I have always avoided it [...] and I am not cut out to be a boss'). She never really desired a second child, having experienced the first as very tiring, and in any case around her there was no real interest in increasing the family. Her parents made it clear to her that they were kept busy enough with one and that she should ask their permission before having a second, and her daughter herself was already four when she categorically expressed her refusal to have siblings ('make me a brother and I'll throw it from the window'). She depicts herself as a rather severe mother, generally obsessed with order and jealous of her own spaces and things in the home.

Loredana, aged 29 at the time of the interview, felt that she had the same characteristics of her mother and ironically recognized that her mother's education had been 'transferred to me', to the point where the mother is the only person who is currently allowed to help her with domestic tasks because she meets her high standards. Both women talked about children as providing annoying interference with their daily routines, an obstacle to free time and free spending. Also their respective husbands are both excluded from domestic tasks since they would not anyhow be able to perform them as they should. Franca would like to become a grandmother, but mostly out of curiosity for this new role and because she thinks her daughter would finally understand the sacrifices parents make for their children and that they have the right to live their

own lives. No reference is made to the grandchild itself. Similarly her daughter never really wanted to have a child.

Loredana, who started and then interrupted university, against her mother's will, works in a field that she likes and which engages her full time and with flexible schedules. She has been married for two years, and having children is an open issue for the couple at the moment: 'if we do not have children as yet, it is because I have withdrawn from the idea, because I never had the desire for a family with a husband and children, absolutely not. My husband is more inclined (to have children)'. She believes that children are not necessary for the couple and that working and childrearing are problematic for women. The only reason for her to risk having a child would be 'that it must be an experience especially for the woman, so that depriving oneself of it maybe it is worth living it because it may enrich you'. Like her mother, children are seen as a path towards self-growth.

Franca does not seem to have lived through any particular objective difficulties during her marriage and motherhood. Yet her subjective experience makes it clear that she feels she is sacrificing and is constrained by her role. Loredana, who could and would count on exactly the same childcare conditions as her mother's in case of a child, feels unable to reconcile them with her work. Once again, there is a strong continuity in the experience and value orientation of mother and daughter and a similar result in terms of fertility guidelines. Whether she will eventually have a child or not, like her mother Loredana will belong to the category of women with very small families relatively speaking (one child for her mother and one child or none for her daughter). There is

little in her working, housing, union and childcare opportunities structure which would predict such an outcome, which is much more related to an implicit role modelled on her mother's example.

THE SOCIAL MEANING OF CHILDREN

I have discussed normative beliefs about fertility choices in terms of proscriptions and prescriptions about childlessness, family size and appropriate timing for childbearing as discussed in interviews with Italian mothers and their adult childless daughters. These two generations stretch over a period of intense changes in fertility in the country, with rapidly declining family sizes and rising age at first birth. I decided to focus on mother–daughter dyads since the great majority of research about fertility focuses on young women, and my aim is to add to this literature by understanding how normative beliefs travel from one generation to the next.

The interpretative analysis of the way in which norms are presented and defended in mother–daughter dyads sheds light on patterns of intergenerational continuity in the social meaning of children between mothers and their daughters. I have identified and illustrated two extreme patterns of continuity, one based on the centrality of family interactions and of the woman's role as mother and carer, and the second based on the centrality of self-realization and woman's autonomy. The norms and values involved in patterns of continuity were assumed to tell us more about continuity in fertility outcomes. Yet, in both patterns daughters' specific fertility expectations are not univocally convergent with or divergent from that of their mothers. What can we say about the intergenerational transmission of fertility behaviour through norms? Despite

divergences in fertility outcomes and the adaptation of norms to biographical variations, mothers and daughters share a mutual understanding of the place children have occupied or shall occupy in their lives. I showed evidence that such convergence partially depends on a reciprocal negotiation of norms and of the meaning of children between the older and younger generations.

These results indicate that it is crucial to approach fertility choices from a life-course perspective. The place of the experience of the family of origin in orienting choices is important and recurrent in daughters' explanations of the reasons why they hold given expectations and attitudes towards childbearing. Childhood experience is crucial to understanding choice orientation in later life. But it is not only the daughters' recollections of childhood that matter. Mothers' later interpretations and recollections of their experiences as wives, mothers and, when relevant, workers co-construct their daughters' understandings of their own experiences during childhood. Adult mothers and childless daughters seem to negotiate the meaning of each other's norms and choices. Longitudinal and interlinked life perspectives then become the only way to understand the meaning associated with children and the consequent fertility intentions of childless women.

Although the aim of the study was to explore one particular class of relationships (mother to daughter), the conversations in the interviews often ranged more widely and were directed by the experiences of the participants. A specific advantage of a qualitative approach is that, while we may enquire about a specific set of issues, it is up to respondents to govern the way in which their answers are told. This often means that

they add details about contextual circumstances and additional relationships from which they draw personal meanings, including meanings regarding children. One consistent finding throughout the interviews was the important role of the experience of siblings' and peers' parenthood in moderating the intergenerational transmission of specific norms. One limitation of a dyadic sample is the possibility that there is a bias in my having interviewed only mothers and daughters who maintained a relationship during the daughter's adulthood. They may be selected for sharing normative beliefs to a greater extent than mothers and daughters who interrupted contact. On the one hand, such convergence may be the cause of their continued close relationship. On the other hand, mothers' attitudes can be influenced by their children's behaviour (Axinn and Thornton 1993), with mothers adapting their beliefs retrospectively to converge with their daughters' choices and thus reduce conflict. This multidirectionality makes making non-longitudinally designed studies of norms and values particularly challenging.

In conclusion, my findings contribute to the literature on intergenerational transmission of fertility and family behaviour by highlighting the complexity of socialization. On the one hand, I find that mothers and daughter talk about childbearing norms with reference to similar underlying values, so that, even when the specific norms are adapted to biographical variations, suggesting resistance, the meanings and values on which they are based are passed on within the dyadic relationship. This adaptation permits the passing of values from one generation to the next, while at the same time allowing for specific behaviours and related permissive, proscriptive and prescriptive norms to be fine-tuned. On the other hand, it is also clear that influences on reported values are at times multidirectional, flowing from adult daughters to mothers.

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