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**FAMILIES *ALL'ITALIANA*:
150 YEARS OF HISTORY**

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Abstract:

In this paper we trace the evolution over time of definitions, data sources, conceptual frameworks and strategies of analysis of family structures and behaviours in Italy since 1861, date of the country Unification.

Then we focus on trends in family patterns at beginning of the new Millennium, and compare the Italian case with the other European countries. We mainly concentrate on data on unions formation and dissolution and show many figures which suggest a growing flexibility of unions and a rising breaking-down of the Italian marriage.

We thus contribute to the discussion about the delay and specificity of the “new” family models in Italy, providing a dynamic picture in a context of institutional constraints and lack of welfare aids.

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Preface

With this paper we intend to contribute to the discussion about the delay and specificity of the family model *all'italiana*, through an historical perspective. After a fresh look at data and documents that describe the evolution of family structures and behaviours from 1861 onwards, we consider trends in family patterns at beginning of the new Millennium, and compare the Italian case with the other European countries. To substantiate our reflection, we also look at the evolution over time of definitions and conceptual frameworks, data sources, strategies of analysis and empirical results.

1 What families? How to detect them?

The concept of “family” had been refined over time, resulting in definitions and survey methods the more and more responding to changes in social institutions. Referring to Corsini (1978) for an extensive review, we retrace them in broad terms, as they are of critical importance both to illustrate the difficulty of reconstructing comparable time series and to understand the origin of certain choices made by the Italian official statistical system.

The first two Population Censuses (1861 and 1871) of the Kingdom were based on the idea of a family closely linked to that of “hearth”, gathering the “domestic partnerships, usual or precarious, of all those people who eat together and warm themselves around the same fire”, including the “servants”, “guests” or the “boarders”, and even the soldiers living in barracks, prisoners in penitentiaries, inmates in caring institutions and other voluntary or forced cohabitations. Only with the Census of 1881 it had been introduced the distinction between the household itself, that is, the “domestic hearth” based on kinship ties and conjugal links, and other forms of collective cohabitation.

Since then, the two fundamental criterions used at Census to identify an household were that of “living under the same roof” and that of “economic unit”, but it was only thanks to a fundamental study of Livi (1915) that the distinction between *household* – as group of people living together for a common task - and *family* – as kinship relations network – became the more and more clear.

“In everyday language we hear about a family with very different meanings; that word indicates the descent along the masculine side in its continuity through time, or one talks of family referring to the single group of parents and children, living together or not the formers with the latters²” (Livi, 1915, p.4). This modern view of what is meant by the term *family*, which highlights on the one hand the kinship relationships and, on the other, the idea of nucleus formed by parents and

² In Italian: *Nel linguaggio comune si sente parlare di famiglia con significato diversissimo; così si indica con tale parola la discendenza dal lato maschile nella sua continuità attraverso il tempo, o si parla di famiglia come dell'insieme dei genitori e dei figli, convivano o no questi ultimi con i primi*

children, began to prevail in data collection only some decades after the Unification of Italy. Following suggestions by Livi and other scholars, for the 1921 Census and the 1931 Census it was adopted a strict definition of *natural household*, aimed to identify, among the total households, those based only on relations of kinship and affinity. In the subsequent surveys this distinction was abandoned, however, and the term “*famiglia*” has been used with the standard meaning of *household*, matching that of *Ménage* of French Censuses or that of *Househaltung* used in the German ones (ISTAT, 1937).

Since the 1936 Census, ISTAT decided to no longer refer to the *present household*, that included only the members present at the time of the Census, but, "given the particular circumstances in which the Census was played, for the absence of the habitual residence of a high number of family heads, it was considered appropriate gathering data on the *resident household*, that is whose head of household has a usual residence in the town at Census" (ISTAT, cit.). This choice created an important path-breaking with the previous surveys.

A crucial example of irresolution related to what kind of information on family are necessary to be collected (that even today continues to be debated) is that of “irregular” unions. Until 1929, date of the Concordat between the State and the Church (*Patti Lateranensi*), not only the unmarried couples, which were relatively few, but also the marriages celebrated only with the religious rite were considered illegal. The Family Code "Pisanelli" of 1865 had, in fact, established that only weddings officiated in a civil ceremony might have legal value. Corrado Gini, on the basis of the evidence stemming from the 1901 Census, noted the large amount of couples who, while declaring at the census as married, were in fact married only religiously or even simply living together. He therefore argued that “the Census can no more avoid to point out a fact that acquired much of social importance”³ (Gini, reported in Corsini 1978). Afterwards, the debate on whether to include a specific question about the “irregular” marital relationship was fierce in preparation of the next Censuses. At the meeting of the Superior Council of Statistics (*Consiglio Superiore di Statistica*) of November 21 1920, during the examination of the contents of the family questionnaire, Beneduce highlights "the need to detect free cohabiting unions. These are now a very common form, which is also implicitly recognized by the new legislation, for example as regards the granting of war pensions. Even the social legislation relating to insurance established that people simply living together can enjoy the benefits"⁴. (Ministero per l'Economia Nazionale 1925, p. 37). The consideration of “irregular” unions became mandatory for the Census of 1931, two years after the signing of the Concordat between Church and State. On that occasion, they were counted more than 200,000 non legally married unions, 2.4% of all households (ISTAT, 1935). Questions on “irregular” families, have been shelved again in subsequent editions of Population Census, but the theme of non-marital unions continued to be present in the social and political debate.

The first Population Census after the II World War, that of 1951, has been of crucial importance to understand changes occurred in family life after the conflict. In fact, ISTAT proposed for the first time a very detailed typology of households, according to the kind of relationship between the head of the family and the other

³ In Italian: *il censimento non possa ormai prescindere dal rilevare un fatto che ha assunto tanta importanza sociale.*

⁴ In Italian: *la necessità di rilevare le libere convivenze. Sono queste ora una forma molto diffusa, che trova anche un riconoscimento implicito nella nuova legislazione, ad esempio per quel che riguarda la concessione delle pensioni di guerra. Così pure nella legislazione sociale relativa alle assicurazioni è stabilito che potranno usufruire dei benefici anche le persone semplicemente conviventi*

cohabiting members. This classification has been utilized in the following three Population Censuses of 1961, 1971 and 1981.

Significant improvements in ways of collecting data on household and family occurred with 1991 Census and, with only minor differences, with that of 2001. Beside a new definition of household, based on the new law approved in 1989 regulating the functioning of the Population Registers (*Anagrafe*), a more detailed classification of family structures have been applied, and, unlike previous Censuses, the informal unions are now explicitly recognized and separately counted.

We just mentioned the Population Registers, that were established in any Italian Municipalities in 1864 and often reformed with subsequent legislative actions until the 1228 Act of 1954. They were destined to receive any piece of information from all the family units residing on the town's territory, having to ensure the continuous updating of population according to civil status events – births, deaths and marriages - and mobility within the national borders or with abroad. Moreover, a reciprocal adjustment between Census and Population Register is made at any Census round, although "it is even today impossible an exact correspondence between the two sources"⁵ (Corsini, cit.).

In 1989, as said, a new Population Register Regulation passed by law, and this deeply influenced definition and data collecting rules. First, the criterion of "income pooling" used to identify the registered household was abolished, while the other two, namely cohabitation and kinship, affinity, adoption, or emotional bonds, remained in force. Secondly, the figure of the "family-holder" was suppressed and the new regulation assigns to each member of the family the responsibility about personal data declaration.

The new regulation aimed to adapt the legislation to a more and more dynamic picture of the Italian society culminated in marked far-reaching changes, both in institutional context and in demographic phenomena. Examples of this state of affair are the reform of family law in 1975 and the changes in household models and family behaviors, which were observed in Italy, although with some delay compared to the rest of Western Europe (see Section 3).

Indeed, neither the Census nor the Population Registry, even in their subsequent refinements and improvements, could have been sufficient to face the growing scientific curiosity of those who wanted to open new perspectives in the study of social phenomena through family-related behaviours (Corsini, cit.), which appeared as a complex phenomenon of multidisciplinary interest. These considerations stirred up a growing interest in surveys on families; they were preceded by those on marriage and fertility held already on the occasion of 1931 Census round, and again in 1961 and 1971. In parallel, it is not worth to remember the initiatives stemming from the Academia, such as the Survey on Women, Fertility and Work promoted in 1974 by Nora Federici at the Institute of Demography of Rome University "La Sapienza". It was followed by the First National Fertility Survey in 1979, financed as part of the international program of the World Fertility Surveys, with the aim to offer to demographers and family sociologists new data able to describe in greater detail the new trends in family life as well as social norms, cultural background, and values. The 1983 ISTAT Survey on Households Structures and Behaviors (*Indagine sulle strutture e i comportamenti familiari*), and the subsequent Multi-Purpose Household Surveys system (*Indagini multiscopo sulle famiglie*) represent an incredible improvement in the quality and the quantity of collected information. They allowed to broaden the

⁵ In Italian: *è ancor'oggi inattuabile una esatta corrispondenza fra le due fonti.*

focus on the family considering also intimate relationships, informal networks of support, and so on. The unit of analysis change and integrate each other: “de facto” households, the basic family units or *nuclei*, and individual that are seen as the main social actors of their own life (ISTAT, 2010a).

The recent history tells of a growing harmonization in the definitions and data sources, which allow sophisticated comparative analyses at the international level both in time and space. Some issues related to data collection still remain problematic, however, namely those ruled by administrative purposes, such as the Population Register. Even today, for example, the quality of data resulting by vital statistics is strongly dependent on the correct application of rules for keeping and updating the registers themselves. At the end of the previous Millennium, the rules became even more hard after the introduction of more restrictive legislation on *privacy* and the simplification of administrative procedure. For example, a new law (127/97), containing “urgent measures for administrative simplification”, introduced substantial changes in vital events registration. Furthermore, law forbids the Population Registers’ Official to know the information contained in the birth certificate – mainly because of privacy reasons – impeding the collection of important data. As a consequence, in 1998, the birth registration was interrupted, causing a loss of many information such as the characteristics of the delivery, of the newborn child and the parents, their geographical distribution and the mothers’ previous reproductive history. In order to fill the consequent lack of information, ISTAT reacted by adopting new strategies. Namely, an integrated system of surveys has been created, that let not only to gather the lost data, but also to considerably widen the relevant information related to births and the corresponding households.

Finally, in spite of the major steps made forward by ISTAT for the recognition of *de facto* families, an important issue is still unsolved. The debate between the cognitive needs of social observers and the political and/or moral opportunities to concede equal rights to citizenships belonging to different family situations is still far from any conclusion. This is the case, for example, of same-sex unions, or simple informal conjugal-type unions, that are not listed as such in standard Population Registers, if not in a few number of Municipalities and in separated lists (De Rose and Marquette, 2011).

2 Long-term changes in the European family

2.1 Some preconceptions to dispel

The historical and demographic studies of the 1970s have developed a typology of family structures (Laslett, 1977), which includes basically four categories of cohabitation, in turn divided into subtypes: (a) domestic groups “without structure”, i.e., where the components are not clearly linked by ties of kinship or relationships or sex. These include the coexistence of both sisters and brothers, that between blood relatives, and those who live alone; (b) “simple” domestic groups, composed of parents with children, couples without children, children with one parent: it represents the basic family unit; (c) “extended” domestic groups, consisting of a simple group in addition to the direct ascending line (a grandfather or grandmother) or descendants (grandchildren) or collaterals (brothers, uncles); (d) “multiple” domestic groups, in which there are multiple nuclei (simple families) interrelated by descent (strain families, such as patriarchal or traditional) or by ties of blood relationship (living together as married brothers with their families).

The application of these typologies to the rich material of historiography in Western countries, particularly European ones, together with the refinement of sociological studies that have contextualized the analysis of the family in economic, institutional, and demographic respects, helped to dispel many common preconceptions about the family of the past and, in turn, allows to interpret the recent changes with greater clarity.

First of all, it was denied the view that, in the past, families were mostly composed by multiple structures, which prevailed everywhere as patriarchal system. It was also denied the fact that young couples establishing separate homes after weddings – *residenza neocale* – began to spread only with the advent of industrialization. The research based on well documented and relatively comparable historical sources, such as the parish registers – *Stati delle anime* – local censuses, etc. has shown, rather, that already in the XV Century in many European countries, including England, nuclear-marital household was the prevailing family structure. Thus, well before the accomplishment of the industrial revolution.

For many centuries the family has played a key role in the productive structure, embedding the character of a real business: particularly in rural industries and handicraft the family acted as a production unit. Moreover, families in the middle class and aristocracy were based on real contracts that regulated the use and the distribution of resources.

Then, the family size was small because of a relatively low fertility, due to the high age at marriage of spouses, and because of the very high level of child mortality (at least until mid-nineteenth century). Yet, extended families and multiple families coexisted with the basic family units, especially in rural areas. In particular, single family units were not prevalent in peasant societies and often associated with adverse social conditions. On the other side, patriarchal families were more common in the bourgeois and the aristocratic social classes because they were seen as a room for the transmission of wealth and the preservation of power.

What prevailed, then, was a wide diversity of family structures, even more articulated than in the present: differences between States, between cities and countryside, between social classes, and between forms of access to property, inheritance and between "trades and crafts" make it very difficult to say what we mean by the *traditional family* of the past.

Apart from a marked variety of shapes and structures, pre-industrial family was also characterized by considerable instability. Contrary to what one might think, in fact, relations and family ties were much less durable and binding than they are in the modern family. The high mortality rate, also supported by a not ignorable geographical mobility and the lack of rapid and efficient means of communication, put at risk the strength of family ties. The infant mortality could deprive a mother up to 50% of its children; the high risk of maternal death from causes related to pregnancy and childbirth, made it possible for a man to fall in widowhood with orphan children, that justified the frequent second marriages; the low male life expectancy, the wars and migration away separated fathers and husbands from wives and children quickly and for a long time if not forever. In short, even without divorce or separation, the family of the past was no less subject to disintegration and instability than it is today.

Certainly, the process of industrialization and urbanization has led to the definitive spread of a family founded on nuclear marriage, that becomes more cohesive internally also thank to the great progress in survival chances of its components. During the XIX Century, a stable model of family founded on marriage, co-residence between spouses, and a prolonged permanence of children

in the family, dominated everywhere in Europe: a model that became popular among all social strata and geographical areas.

On the threshold of the XX Century, the Western family system thus provides to be more simplified in structure and more binding in reciprocal behaviours: marriage establishes the union of the couple, the neo-locality characterizes the housing choice, the strong parent-child relationship becomes the essence of the parental bond. The new family model is now founded on highly individualistic and private values: the understanding sexual love between spouses, who choose each other not on the base of economic interests or a contract between families of origin, but on the strength of their feelings; the indissolubility of marriage; and the respect and care for children, which play a central role in parental affections and in the allocation of resources (Saraceno, 1996).

This model of family, with its system of norms and values, is so deeply rooted in Western culture, so that it become the benchmark scenario while speaking about "traditional family". Indeed, compared to this model – and not to a generic family of the past – the cultural, social and demographic changes occurred in the twentieth century, and particularly after the end of the II World War, marked a revolution, namely in the ways of the constitution and organization of the family (see Section 4).

Overall, what is questioned in the “contemporary” family system compared to the "traditional" one are not the romantic and individualistic goals underlying family formation. The love between partners remains at the base of a couple, but marriage (especially those celebrated with religious ceremony) is not anymore the only possibility to start living together; in turn, the beginning of the cohabitation can be postponed. The link between partners is no longer unbreakable if love and sexual harmony fade away; parenthood remains of unquestioned personal value, but the number of children can be tightly contracted and births may be spaced and planned.

2.2 *The case of Italy*

Even in Italy, the rich historical excursus carried out by Barbagli about changes in ways of living "under one roof"⁶, highlights the complexity of family patterns characterising the Italian population right after the Unification as well as its marked geographical differences. Everywhere the nuclear family prevailed, but, in agreement with rules of residence after the wedding, rather dissimilar, in the Northern regions multiple families were much more prevalent than in the South (Barbagli, 1984). Incidentally, the patriarchal multiple household model, so beloved by the popular imagination of the Italian society was much less common than it was believed until recently.

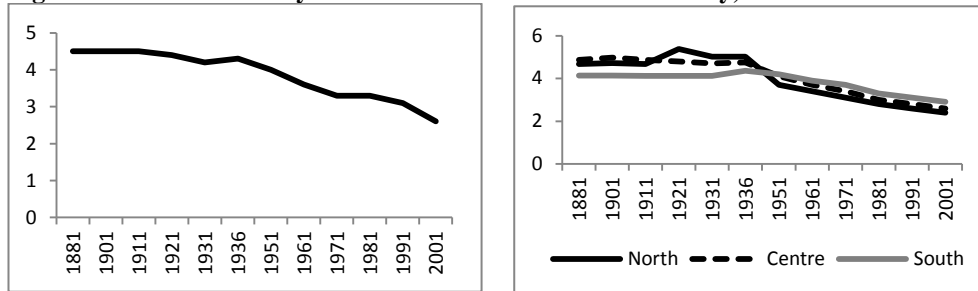
The Italian 1881 Census round (the first two, do not provide separate data between households and cohabitations, see Section 2) displays, on average, 4.5 members per household; and higher values in the Northern regions (Figure 1). Livio Livi, observing for the first time these data, explained the larger dimension of Northern regions households and thus the higher “family cohesion” just on the base of the different “economic effect” (Livi, cit.).

The most significant changes in the composition of households are observed from the mid-XX Century. The average household size decreased rapidly: from 4.0 in 1951 to 3.3 in 1971, to 2.6 in 2001, and to 2.4 in 2010, compared to an increase in the number of households, almost doubled in 50 years, from 11.814 thousands in

⁶ In Italian: *sotto lo stesso tetto*.

1951 to 21.800 in 2001. At the same time, the North-to-South gradient reversed, with the family size shrinking faster in the Northern than in the Southern ones (Figure 1).

Figure 1 – Trend in family size and territorial differences. Italy, 1881-2001



Source: ISTAT, Population Census, 1881-2001

As in other Western European countries, the reduction of the average family size is not meant to be a simplification of the types of relationships and living together: indeed, the changes of this very synthetic indicator conceal a profound transformation in the mechanisms leading to union formation, reproductive patterns, social and legal norms regulating the dissolution of marriages, and the formation of new families.

Cultural evolution and changes in customs, as well as institutional changes and economic and technological progress that Western societies have faced in recent decades, accompanied and supported the new patterns of family behavior. In Italy, this path is intertwined with the specific economic and social history of the country and changes in family structures and behaviours are certainly explained by the above mentioned processes, albeit in a very complex and territorial-specific mechanisms. The peculiar Italian facets of industrialization and urbanization processes also help to explain why the Italian family appeared "late" in comparison to other European countries: the delay in the diffusion of new family pattern appeared in parallel with a delayed process of modernization of the country (Barbagli, cit.).

However, the extensive studies conducted using data from sample surveys on household and individuals since the year 1980 (see Section 2) from a life-course and a comparative perspective offer a more articulated picture of the ways of "doing family" in Italy and suggest the importance to frame the changes also looking at other country's peculiarities (Zanatta, 2003). In the following sections we focus on the most recent history of Italian family in comparison to the rest of Europe and illustrate the main explanatory factors, also on the basis of results from empirical research on unions formation and dissolution.

3 Changes in the society and in the family: The Italian tale since 1970s

3.1 Italy, and Italy in Europe

After the mid XX Century, modernization, industrialization, and urbanization spread at different paces throughout Europe (Frejka, 2008). This led to the expansion of the service sector and created a renewed social stratification. Almost

in parallel, since the beginning of 1960s, Europe has been experiencing a rapid transformation in the patterns of union formation and dissolution. In line with the Second Demographic Transition conceptual framework (Lesthaeghe, 1992; Sobotka, 2008), the main features of this process have been everywhere the same: cohabitation has increased outdistancing direct marriage and the number of unhappy marriages ending in divorce has risen. However, there has been a lot of cross-country variations in the intensity and the pace of the change. This process is most advanced in Nordic European countries where cohabitation is viewed as an accepted alternative to marriage and where more than half of marriages end in divorce, followed by Western, and Central and Eastern countries (e.g. Liefbroer and Dourleijn, 2006). The laggard cluster is Southern Europe, where we observe a delayed diffusion of new family behaviours (Hantrais, 2005).

Indeed, in the Mediterranean Europe things began to change later, not before than mid 1970s. Italy is a clear example of this state of affair because the country experienced a series of important changes, in society in general and in legislation in particular, in a very limited time-span, mainly due to the political awakening of the young in the late 1960s and the strength of the feminist movement in the 1970s (Livi Bacci, 2001). For instance, advertising contraceptives was legally permitted in 1969, divorce was introduced in 1970, the new law regulating family ties was approved in 1975, and abortion was legalized in 1978. All these societal transformations took place under the relatively preoccupied eyes of the Vatican and under governments of Catholic inspiration (De Rose *et al.*, 2008). Women's employment also increased rapidly compared to that of other European countries, although in Italy it is still low by European standards and Lisbon's EU targets. The change in women's societal role is especially illustrated by developments in their educational attainment. Today more women than men in the age group 25–44 have a university degree. Between the academic years 1970-71 and 2005-06 the percentage of women obtaining a vocational or senior secondary school qualification – the Italian diploma – tripled, and today about 80% of 19-year-old women hold a diploma (ISTAT, 2008).

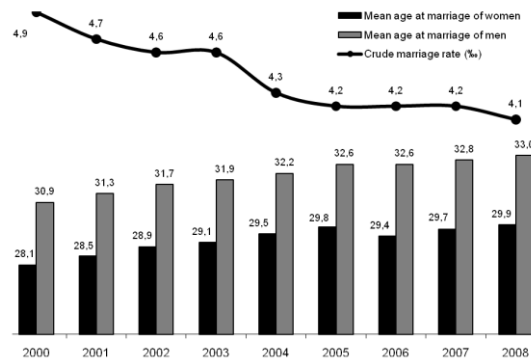
Accordingly, Italy was characterized by a very rigid union dynamic pattern until mid-1970s. From mid-1970s the rate of Italian marriages starts a period of progressive decline, however. In the same period, a postponement in the age at marriage occurred as well. Then, during the 1980s we can observe the first traces of change, although the country preserved some peculiarities such as a low diffusion of marital disruptions and a slow pace of spread of cohabitation. During 1990s and especially since 2000 things have changed illustrating a much more complex family formation pattern, an increase of separations and divorces (Vignoli and Ferro, 2009), and a not-negligible diffusion of cohabitations (Gabrielli and Hoem, 2010). In short, already from these premises the link between changes in the Italian society and changes in the family seem to be intertwined. We substantiate this argument in the following, through proper figures.

We confine our illustrations mainly to the period 2000-2008 because it is the one that highlights the most evident and unexpected signs of change. The *macro* data used stems from ISTAT's current surveys. Marriage, legal separations, and divorce are formally registered at any time by law. Other episodes of union formation, such as consensual unions, are not collected in official registers as well and, thus, can be studied through sample surveys only. The *micro* data were retrieved from the Italian variant of the Gender and Generations Survey (namely, the Italian Household Multipurpose Survey "Family and Social Subjects") conducted in November 2003. It represents the most representative and detailed survey in Italy up to date. Such data contains retrospective partnership histories.

3.2 Trends in marriages

In 2008 have been celebrated around 250 thousands of marriages, thus four every 1 thousands of inhabitants (Figure 2). In the same year, the mean age at marriage has been risen at 30 years for women and 33 years for men. Marriage is not only changing quantitatively but also qualitatively: between 2000 and 2008 first weddings were falling (from 90% to 86%); second and subsequent weddings were increasing (from about 10% to about 14%); and marriages in which at least one of the two spouses do not have Italian citizenship were growing (from 7% to 10%) (see Vignoli *et al.* 2011). In particular, one of the strongest signals of the ongoing Italian “family revolution” is represented by the exceptional increase in marriages celebrated with not-religious ceremony. If in the early 1960s the marriages celebrated with not-religious ritual were less than 2.0%, in 2010 they are about 37.0% (namely, a marriage over three). This increase, although partly due to the growth of second and higher-order marriages and marriages with at least a foreign spouse, increasingly affects first unions. In 2008, ¼ of first marriages was celebrated with not-religious ceremony (ISTAT, 2010b).

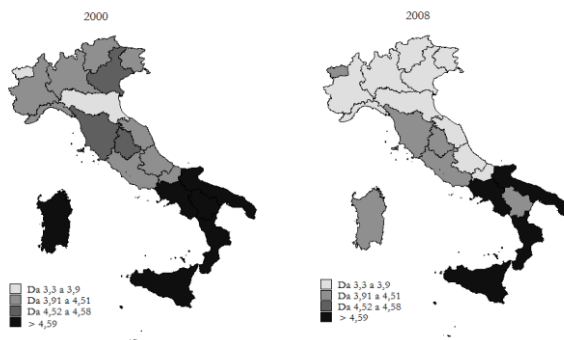
Figure 2 – Trend in marital union and mean age at marriage by gender. Italy, 2000-2008.



Source: www.demo.istat.it

Despite the general downward trend of marriages is widespread across Italy, territorial differentials are persisting. Generally speaking they suggest a clear North-South gradient. Up to now, people get married more in the South (4,9‰ inhabitants in 2008) than in the North (3,6‰ inhabitants) and in the Center (4,0‰ inhabitants). Territorial differentials amplified comparing regions (Figure 3). In 2008 total marital rate ranges between the minimum of Friuli-Venezia Giulia (3,3 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants) to the maximum of Campania (5,5 marriages per 1,000 inhabitants).

Figure 3 – Period total divorce rate by Italian regions, 2000 and 2008.



Source: Vignoli *et al.* 2011.

3.3 Trends in marital dissolution

In Italy, it is not easy to obtain a divorce, which has been legally permissible since 1970 (Law n. 898) but only after a long period of physical and legal separation between the spouses (five years, initially; three years since 1987).

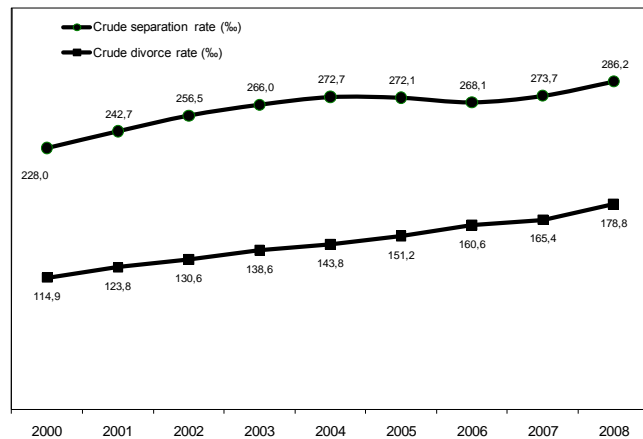
Looking at absolute numbers of divorces, it is not worth to separate the diffusion of marital instability in Italy into five phases. The first phase is the one of the introduction of divorce law; it lasts between 1971 and 1974 registering about 20,000 divorces per year. Not many, if we remember that in the early 1970s the potential population was constituted by all partners legally separated by at least 5 years that were waiting to dissolve their marriage by Law. Not many, also considering that up to the nationwide Italian referendum on the right to divorce held on the 12 May 1974, the survival of the divorce law was uncertain. The second phase runs from 1975 and 1980 and records about 12,000 divorces by year: it mainly concerns new cases of divorce. The third phase (1981-1986) appears characterized by a beginning of increase in the trend, with more than 15,000 divorces per year. Even if not strong, the increase is crucial because it happens in anticipation of the Law of 1987 that reduced the mandatory years of legal separation from five to three. In the fourth phase, from 1987, the increase in the absolute number of divorces started to be particularly relevant, reaching about 27,000 events in 1994. The rising breaking-down of Italian marriage illustrates its maximum intensity in the fifth phase, that began in mid-1990s and, especially, through the first decade of the XXI century. Between 1995 and 2008, in fact, the absolute number of divorces increased by more than 100%.

Turning from absolute to relative numbers, the Period Total Divorce Rate (sum of age-specific divorce rates), with respect to a hypothetical (synthetic) cohort of 1000 marriages, highlights the rise in Italian marital dissolution since the beginning of the 1990s (Vignoli *et al.* cit.). From 2000 to 2008, it increases respectively from around 115 (divorces every 1,000 marriages) to 180 (Figure 4). However, only the 40% of legal separations fall in divorce: the counterpart (60%) is not necessarily driven to a re-union. In 2008, the legal separations concern 30% of marital union (Figure 4).

But how much and how this increase in separations and divorces rather affects the duration of marriages? To properly assess this issue is necessary to move the perspective of the analysis from the year marking the breaking of the marital union to the one marking its beginning (Figure 5). We look at marriages surviving at different durations and compare them among marriage cohorts. After eight years

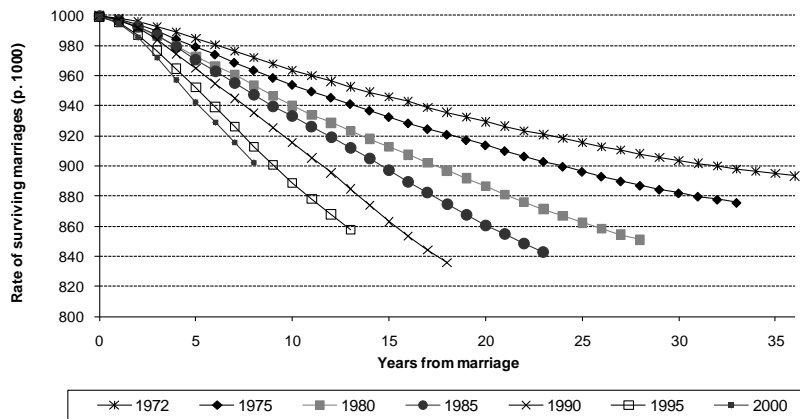
from the celebration (i.e. after having overcome the famous "crisis of the seventh year") for the 1972 cohort 972 unions were surviving among the initial 1000, while for the 1990 and 2000 cohorts this figure is reduced to 935 and 902, respectively. Note that such number of surviving marriages (902) is reached by the 2000 marriage cohort after eight years, by the 1990 marriage cohort 1990 after 15, and by the 1972 marriage cohort after 32.

Figure 4 – Trends in divorce and (legal) separation in Italy, 2000-2008.



Source: *www.demo.istat.it*.

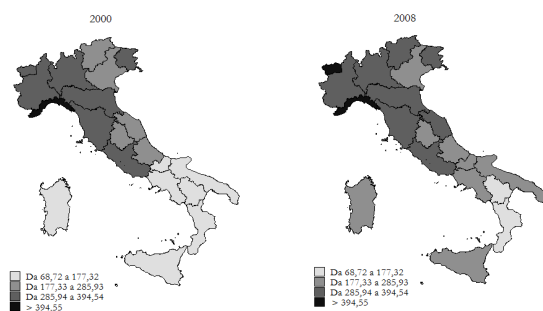
Figure 5 – Proportion of surviving marriages by marriage cohorts.



Source: *Vignoli et al. 2011*.

Differentials between the North and the South of the country persist in union dissolution as well (Figure 6). Legal separations are generally more frequent in the North and in specific Central regions (such as Lazio and Tuscany) than in the South. In the North we observe as the same level of marital dissolution as in the North-Center European countries (30-40 separations every 100 marriages).

Figure 6 – Period total (legal) separation rate by Italian regions, 2000 and 2008.



Source: Vignoli *et al.* 2011.

3.4 Trends in consensual unions

According to sample surveys on family and households, also the consensual unions are increasing in Italy. Overall the universe of cohabiting people is very heterogeneous, a sort of “archipelagos” (Rosina, 2007): some people perceive cohabitation as a specific step in their life-course prior to marriage, either to evaluate if the relationship is well-functioning or to wait a more stable (housing and economic) situation; some cohabit by choice and remains un-married for the rest of their lives; other cohabit because it is not possible to legally formalize their union, as not yet legally divorced or in the case of same-sex couples. In Table 1, the trend of first union by type and calendar period shows the prevalence of direct marriages (close to $\frac{3}{4}$ in the last observed period). However, the growing presence of pre-marital and consensual unions is clear: the former increases from 6.5% to 11.0% and the latter from 2.3% to 15.4% respectively from 1980-85 to 1995-2003.

Also in the case of pre-marital consensual unions and cohabitations the North-South gradient is evident (Table 1). An increased incidence of cohabitation seems to correspond also in anticipation of their cadence (Vignoli *et al.*, cit.). The percentage distribution of first consensual unions for women in the period 1980-90 shows a pick at the age 25-30 yrs old. In the subsequent calendar periods, the pick seems to be anticipated at the previous age class 20-25 yrs old.

Table 1 – Type of first union by calendar period and macro-area in Italy, 1980-2003.

| | Marital union | Pre-marital cohabitation | Consensual union |
|--------------------------|---------------|--------------------------|------------------|
| Period | | | |
| 1980-1984 | 91.2 | 6.5 | 2.3 |
| 1985-1989 | 88.1 | 8.4 | 3.5 |
| 1990-1994 | 83.4 | 10.8 | 5.8 |
| 1995-2003 | 73.7 | 11 | 15.4 |
| <i>total</i> | 82.9 | 9.4 | 7.7 |
| Area of residence | | | |
| North | 88.4 | 6.5 | 5.1 |
| Center | 92 | 4 | 4 |
| South | 94.6 | 3.8 | 1.6 |
| <i>total</i> | 82.9 | 9.4 | 7.7 |

Source: Gabrielli and Vignoli 2010

4 Explaining behaviours

4.1 *The shift in research from macro to micro*

We now move the focus of our discourse from the description of the trends in new family behaviours to the search of their determinants. In the second half of the XX Century, in fact, the scientific study of population changed its paradigm from the macro to the micro so that attention became focused mainly on individuals as the agents of demographic action. This ‘shift from studies on structures to studies on processes’ (e.g. Willekens, 1991; 1999), might be attributed to the increasing interest of demographers in research of individual behaviour on the one hand, and the progress in both data collection and analytical methods on the other hand. The former is a natural consequence of changes in family-related behaviour which progressed rapidly since the 1960s, whereas the latter might be linked to developments in survey-based social research, and progress in computational techniques and quantitative methods. Among them, development of the methods for longitudinal data collection and analysis, and in particular event-history analysis, constitute a path-breaking step in the studies on human behaviours. This new approach led to a set of research on individual behaviours much wider than is afforded by classical macro-demographic analysis, and enabled a move from the mere description of phenomena to their interpretation (Courgeau and Lelièvre, 1997; Salvini and Santini, 1999).

Life-course theory and event-history techniques, which aim to explore people’s life choices, have become standard practice in contemporary family and fertility research. They also faced methodological advancements in at least two directions. First, in terms of *multilevel modelling* that allow the analyst to detect the effect of the context on individual behaviour as well as to identify the macro-characteristics which are mainly responsible for the contextual effect (Borra and Racioppi, 1995; Voss, 2007). Second, in terms of *multiprocess modelling* that allow to simultaneously consider parallel careers (such as fertility, partnership, employment, and so on) acknowledging the possible presence of non-random factors that can affect at the same time the different careers.

Only the shift in the research paradigm from macro to micro and the consequent methodological developments allow the study of the determinants of the new family changes. Overall, demographers and sociologists agree that the underlying determinants of the new behaviours are primarily the accentuation of individual autonomy, the increasing importance given to personal development, especially in the professional field, the changing role of women in society and the family. Deciding to postpone marriage, to cohabit, to dissolve an unhappy union, all become life-course strategies, embedded in biographies less and less standard. In the next section we provide a micro-illustration regarding the role played by women’s education on marriage disruption risks. It provides evidence that also the links between the new behaviours and their determinants are changing.

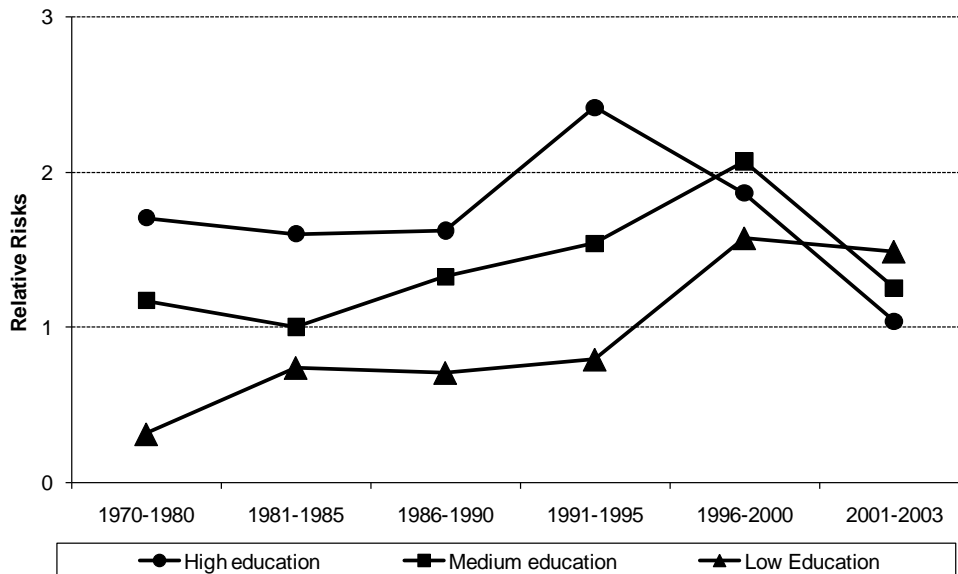
4.2 *An example: educational gradient and the diffusion of marital disruption in Italy*

The analysis of Italian marital break ups started to be considered “statistically” interesting about a decade after the application of the law on divorce, approved in 1970. Past trends suggest a link between rising marital disruption and the increased level of education of Italian women. De Sandre (1980) was the first to show the increase in marital instability among women of high socio-economic status in the

first half of the 1970s, a finding later confirmed by Corsini and Ventisette (1988), still on aggregate data, and by De Rose (1992) on micro data. Incidentally, De Rose concluded that the modest diffusion of family dissolution in Italy was to be ascribed, at least in part, to the relative backward situation of Italian women, who, with low levels of education and scarce and lower-qualified occupational activities, were basically confined to the roles of wives and mothers. After this first pioneering study the analysis of individual pathways leading to divorce, as a step in a woman's life-course, did not develop much. But also a recent study by Vignoli and Ferro (2009), corroborate the view that in Italy women's degree of economic independence, of which higher education represents a valid marker, is still one factor which plays a pivotal role in the effective possibilities to handle a separation.

But, beside this incontrovertible positive gradient between women's education and marital dissolution, have this association always being the same over the last decades? William J. Goode (1962) argued that, at least initially, only the most "modern" couples would have the cultural and economic means to afford a divorce. As the social acceptability of divorce increases, the relationship between social status and divorce tends to become less significant and may even reverse its sign, so that, at the end of the process, marriage dissolution could be even more common at the bottom of the social hierarchy. This line of reasoning were further corroborated by the empirical analysis of Blossfeld *et al.* (1995) and Harkonen and Dronkers (2006).

Figure 7 – Trends in separation intensities in Italy by women's educational level, 1970–2003. Relative risks, by interaction between calendar period and women's educational level.



Source: Salvini and Vignoli 2011.

Note: The interaction is controlled for birth cohort, area of residence, parental divorce, number and age of youngest child, and employment status.

Consistently with Goode's hypothesis empirical studies found a positive educational gradient in Italy (e.g., De Rose, 1992). Recently, however, the period total divorce rate has increased dramatically (see Section 4.3). In this particular period of a rapid spread of separations Salvini and Vignoli (2011), by means of an event-history analysis based on the 2003 FSS (Family and Social Subjects survey) data, found some traces of a reversal in the educational gradient as the rate of

separation was increasing more abruptly among the low educated while it levelled-off among the high educated (Figure 7). The strong increase in marriage disruption observed in Italy in the last period appears thus mainly due to the fact that even the less educated women – who are still the most numerous group – are now facing a marked increase in separation risk. Their decision to opt for a separation is facilitated because the traditional and cultural setting has already been violated by their better educated counterparts.

5 The future of Italian families between wishes and constraints

So far we have shown that during the last decades, especially since mid-1970s, marriage has lost much of its centrality in Italy. However, the general incidence of consensual unions and marital disruption is still low compared to European standards.

Researchers offer two main interpretations of this state of affair. The first hypothesis can be called “Specificity” and claims that the adoption of cohabitation and marital dissolution among Italians will remain at lower levels than the rest of Europe (e.g., Reher, 1998). In line with this assumption, the differences among social groups persist over time, because the diffusion process by social strata is stagnant (e.g., Nazio and Blossfeld, 2003). The second hypothesis can be called “Delay”. According to this second theory Italy is a late-comer in the “new” family patterns together with other Southern European Countries (e.g., Barbagli *et al.*, 2003; Lesthaeghe and Willems, 1999). Thus, the diffusion process of consensual unions and marital disruptions within these countries occurred as well as the others and it is just temporally lagged.

Our paper, keeping in mind the last 150 years of history of Italian families, contributes to this general discussion. The examples we have illustrated confirm of a rising breaking-down of Italian marriages towards a growing flexibility of unions. They also illustrate a “democratization” of the new process of marital disruption in Italian society among various social groups. In a similar vein, other analyses conducted at the micro level suggest that such pattern of democratisation is not only in play among social group, but also between women and men (Salvini and Vignoli, 2011) as well as among geographical areas (Gabrielli and Vignoli, 2010). With only minor differences the same trend and trendsetters can be found also as regards the diffusion of consensual unions (Gabrielli and Vignoli, *cit.*).

What will the future be of the Italian families? The question is definitely ambitious, but our study provides at least some hints in this respect. Our results clearly show the great amount of qualitative changes that the Italian society is going to experience and a very dynamic picture of the Italian context with respect to the diffusion of “new” family patterns. And they also pose a challenge to the fact that Italy will not reach the levels displayed by the rest of Europe in terms of incidence of cohabitation and marriage disruption. As already observed (De Rose *et al.*, 2008), spreading of new behaviours in Italy is curbed by the lack of a favourable social context. For example, a number of features are responsible for the scarce diffusion of non-marital cohabitation: strong ties between parents and children, a welfare state that provides very limited direct help to youth (Rosina and Fraboni, 2004; Di Giulio and Rosina, 2007), and an unfriendly legislation towards not married couples (De Rose and Marquette, 2011).

Overall, Italy is a contradictory society, and to be ready to support the inevitable changes in family way of living – clearly visible in the living arrangements of the younger generation – it will be necessary to remove some of our typical constraints

all'italiana, as deeply illustrated in a recent report on Italian population (Salvini and De Rose, 2011). High number of children wanted, but few helps to family with children. High acceptance of non-marital unions, but no rights recognition. Claim for independence from young people, but problems in the labour market and housing systems. Women more and more educated and working, but still in a unequal gender system. Importance to intergenerational links, but few state support to family with elderly or disabled. Warming hospitality and open heart toward the stranger, but lack of both organization and of accepted rules for social inclusion.

In the end, we wish to finish as we started: with some observations on data collection system. The growing complexity of life-courses that contemporary Italy is facing is difficult to be explained, or at least understood, due to lack of appropriate data. Future research should therefore be conducted using richer datasets that provide longitudinal (demographic, social, attitudinal, and economic) information for each member of the family, and the household itself. In other words, a panel survey dedicated to families, already asked by the scientific community (Pinnelli *et al.*, 2003; Corsini *et al.*, 2008), is no more deferrable.

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