

Family ideals in Italy and Spain: towards the end of the traditional Southern European family model?

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This study explores what constitutes an ideal family in Italy and Spain, questioning the prevailing view that they are homogenous and traditional family-oriented countries. Specifically, it investigates whether family ideals in Italy and Spain can be characterized as ‘traditional’ (i); whether family ideals are similar in the two countries (ii); and whether these ideals vary across gender and educational backgrounds (iii). To capture the multidimensional nature of family ideals, we employed a factorial survey experiment in which respondents evaluated a set of family scenarios. This approach enables an assessment of the relative importance of the factors shaping individuals’ perceptions of the ideal family. The findings unveil a significantly modern picture of family ideals, where good communication and gender equality play a key role in positive family evaluations. However, cross-country comparisons reveal a greater prevalence of postmodern family ideals in Spain than in Italy, with a few, but notable differences across gender and education.

Introduction

Since the 1960s, families in Western societies have undergone significant transformations. Demographic trends have come to be characterized by declining fertility rates, an increase in cohabitation and single-person households, higher rates of separation and divorce, re-partnering, and a growing proportion of children born to unmarried couples and single parents (Lesthaeghe, 2014). These changes reflected a broader societal shift towards individualism, materialism, and personal fulfilment, which have gained importance at the expense of traditional group solidarity (Lesthaeghe, 2014). Deeper intimacy, open communication, and shared emotional disclosures have become increasingly crucial for successful relationships (Giddens, 1992). This period also witnessed significant changes in gender and generational dynamics, with the pursuit of gender equality emerging as a prominent societal goal. While this transition has gradually spread across most Western societies, Southern European countries, initially exhibited slower and more modest changes than others (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004).

The unique aspects of family culture and social policies in Italy and Spain were considered important barriers to the de-traditionalization of family dynamics (Jurado Guerrero and Naldini, 1996; Viazzo, 2003; Lomazzi, 2017). Indeed, these two countries are generally classified within the ‘Southern European family model’ (Jurado Guerrero and Naldini, 1996; González, Jurado and Naldini, 1999; Mínguez and Crespi, 2017) due to shared cultural and socio-economic characteristics. This family model is characterized by a strong institutionalization of marriage, a male breadwinner structure, extended family co-residence, dense kin networks with frequent support exchanges, and deeply family-oriented values emphasizing children (Jurado Guerrero and Naldini, 1996; Karamessini, 2008).

Nevertheless, although Italy and Spain are still generally perceived as family-oriented with distinctly traditional structures, family dynamics in these countries have changed markedly, converging with broader European patterns (Dominguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martin, 2013; Aassve *et al.*, 2024b). Fertility rates have been persistently low for over four decades, and recent demographic trends indicate an accelerated

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transition in other family behaviours, with significant increases in rates of divorce, cohabitation, and out-of-wedlock births (Eurostat, 2024). While changes appear radical in both countries, Spain's transition is more advanced, highlighting emerging divergences. A key driver of these changes is educational expansion: both Italy and Spain have witnessed substantial increases in tertiary enrolment (Eurostat, 2024), with associated shifts in values, aspirations, and labour market opportunities that likely contribute to the de-traditionalization of family behaviours. However, since women have benefited disproportionately from this educational expansion, it may also have introduced divergences in men and women aspirations.

Against this backdrop this study endeavours to determine whether Italy and Spain adhere to traditional family ideals, or whether the common assumption of their homogeneity, traditionalism, and strong family orientation requires reconsideration. Particular attention is given to the role of education and gender in shaping family ideals in both countries: while traditional demographic behaviour may be prevalent in some societal groups—particularly when considering gender and educational differences—they may be less crucial in others (Cherlin, 2018, 2020).

Family ideals are multidimensional, encompassing various attributes of family life such as partnership dynamics, childbearing and child-rearing practices, economic conditions and arrangements, the division of household responsibilities, as well as balancing family and career commitments. When individuals think about an ideal family, they consider all these attributes simultaneously. Thus, to study and capture these different dimensions, we designed a factorial survey experiment (FSE) that presented respondents with different family scenarios they had to evaluate (see general results in Aassve *et al.*, 2024a). FSEs allow us to integrate key family characteristics into a comprehensive conceptual framework, providing a deeper understanding of the importance attributed to different family characteristics (Auspurg and Hinz, 2014; McDonald, 2019). One important advantage of the FSE is that individuals do not evaluate family attributes in isolation, but assess a comprehensive description of a family, weighing some characteristics against others they consider more important—as they would in real-life situations. This analytical approach reveals the relative importance of various elements that collectively shape the perception of an ideal family, enabling us to evaluate whether the notion of a successful family is anchored in the Southern European family model, or tends to align with post-modern family ideals. Finally, it also permits assessing whether these perceptions vary across Italy and Spain, as well as across gender and educational levels.

Background

Changes in western families and variations by education and gender

Following World War II, living standards in Western societies rose driven by modernization, urbanization, and globalization (Mills and Blossfeld, 2012). Concurrently individual priorities gradually shifted away from survival concerns, solidarity, and religion (Lesthaeghe, 2014), towards greater individualism and emphasis on self-fulfilment, together with a significant redefinition of women's roles in society. This cultural shift contributed to the progressive individualization of family relationships (Giddens, 1992; Cherlin, 2004; Lesthaeghe, 2014).

Families in postmodern societies—or postmodern families—have become increasingly characterized by the diffusion of a cultural model of expressive individualism, in which family life is primarily framed as a matter of individual choice rather than conformity to predefined roles (Giddens, 1992; Knapp and Wurm, 2019). According to the Second Demographic Transition proponents, this has led to demographic behaviours such as low fertility, decreasing marriage rates, and rise in cohabitation and divorce (Lesthaeghe, 2014). The rewards derived from family relations have also gradually evolved. While they were previously centred on fulfilling socially prescribed roles, such as being a good parent or a loyal and supportive spouse, the focus has shifted to personal development and emotional intimacy, supported by open communication and the mutual sharing of feelings between partners (Giddens, 1992; Knapp and Wurm, 2019). In contexts such as the United States or Northern Europe, changes in family dynamics have been so pronounced that family scholars (e.g., Cherlin, 2004, 2020; Gross, 2005; Knapp and Wurm, 2019) have coined the concepts of deinstitutionalization and detraditionalization of the family to describe these processes. With few differences, both terms refer to a broad weakening of the social norms that historically defined family behaviours, resulting in a pluralization of family forms (Cherlin, 2004; Gross, 2005).

Transforming social institutions is inherently slow and the pace of these processes is contingent on cultural factors. Changes in family patterns were faster and more profound in countries where religion and family ties were weaker, and where educational expansion and the gender revolution advanced faster (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004). Furthermore, an institution could remain the dominant arrangement for some social groups while weakening in others (Cherlin, 2020). The Second Demographic Transition argues that postmodern family behaviours first emerged among the higher educated and upper socio-economic

strata, who were more likely to possess the cultural and economic resources to challenge traditional social norms. Over time, these new family patterns were expected to gradually diffuse to lower socio-economic groups (Lesthaeghe, 2014, 2020), a pattern that has been broadly confirmed across Europe (Harkonen and Dronkers, 2006; Lesthaeghe, 2020). As such, in the early stages of this transition, higher-educated individuals may tend to adopt more modern family ideals than their lower-educated counterparts, with these ideals gradually spreading to the rest of the population.

Gender also matters a great deal for new family behaviours, as it shapes expectations around work, care, and family life (Ridgeway and Correll, 2004). But the gender revolution progresses at different speeds for men and women. Initially, women increasingly enter paid work, while men's involvement in household and care work remains limited. This imbalance results in women bearing the double burden of both paid work and unpaid care responsibilities. Only in a more advanced phase of gender equality, men begin to share domestic responsibilities more equally (Esping-Andersen and Billari, 2015; Goldscheider, Bernhardt and Lappegård, 2015). In societies still transitioning between these phases, women who experience this double burden may develop family ideals that emphasize more egalitarian or supportive family arrangements. Consequently, family ideals may diverge sharply between men and women, with women more likely to embrace egalitarian ideals, while men remain more inclined to adhere to traditional family models.

Southern European families in transition

Until recent decades Italy and Spain stood out as exceptions in the European landscape. Beginning in the late 1970s both experienced a progressive delay in child-bearing and a particularly sharp decline in fertility rates (even compared with other European countries). Despite a small rebound in the early 2000s, fertility rates have remained persistently low over the past 40 years. By 2022, the total fertility rate had dropped to 1.24 in Italy and 1.16 in Spain, with the average age at first birth for women reaching 31.6 years in both countries (Ine, 2024; Istat, 2024). Indeed, declining fertility rates were partly driven by postponement, with childbirth occurring at increasingly older ages. However, complete cohort fertility also declined substantially. In Italy, the average number of children per woman fell from 1.7 for the 1960 birth cohort to 1.4 for the 1977 cohort. In Spain, the decline was even sharper, dropping from 1.8 children per woman for those born in 1960 to 1.3 for the 1977 cohort (Human Fertility Database, 2025). Despite persistently low fertility, Italy and Spain experienced slower and lesser changes in other family behaviours—like

cohabitation, divorce, and out-of-wedlock births—until the onset of the century compared with their Western European counterparts (Surkyn and Lesthaeghe, 2004; Lesthaeghe, 2014). Likewise, gender roles largely remained anchored to the traditional male-breadwinner model, and family solidarity continued to underpin welfare (González, Jurado and Naldini, 1999; Naldini and Saraceno, 2008; Lomazzi, 2017).

The delayed and initially moderate transition in family behaviours and values in Italy and Spain, compared with most Western countries, has commonly been attributed to entrenched cultural norms, the authoritarian political legacy, the pervasive influence of the Catholic Church, and specific economic conditions that historically shaped familial structures in both countries (Reher, 1998; Dominguez-Folgueras and Castro-Martin, 2013; Naldini and Jurado Guerrero, 2013; Vignoli and Salvini, 2014). Indeed, Italy and Spain share a history of strong influence of the Catholic Church and far-right authoritarian regimes in the 20th century, which delayed modernization of family legislation and social behaviours (Jurado Guerrero and Naldini, 1996). Italy's fascist and post-fascist era, led by the Christian Democratic Party alongside a powerful Catholic Church, prolonged traditional family structures codified during fascism, thereby impeding family law reforms (Ginsborg, 1989). The 1970s marked a period of modernization and secularization in Italy, characterized by significant legal milestones such as the legalization of divorce (1970), family law reform (1975), enactment of work equality legislation (1977) and abortion legalization (1978). Similarly, Spain, under a fascist dictatorship supported by the Catholic Church, resisted changes in family legislation until the late 1970s. The post-dictatorship transition from 1975 saw a shift to a pluralistic democracy in Spain, culminating in the 1981 reform of the Civil Code. This reform introduced civil marriage, transferred jurisdiction over marital dissolution from the Church to the state, and established unilateral divorce with a separation requirement (Jurado Guerrero and Naldini, 1996). Further legal changes in 2005 eliminated the separation requirement for divorce and granted legal recognition to cohabiting and same-sex unions. Italy, instead, recognized cohabiting and same-sex unions only in 2016 (Ferrari, 2017; Caprinali, Vitali and Cortina, 2023). In Spain, new generations coming of age during the transition to democracy experienced a strong backlash against conservative social norms and traditional gender roles prevalent during the authoritarian regime. Their desire to be 'modern' accelerated the rejection of previous norms and the adoption of new forms of behaviour already present elsewhere in Europe (Bernardi and Martínez-Pastor, 2011; Alonso, Ciccía and Lombardo, 2023).

Both in Italy and in Spain, new family demographic patterns spread first across more secularized individuals, those with the highest socioeconomic profiles, and predominantly among those living in urban areas (Adsera, 2006b, 2007; Aassve *et al.*, 2024b; Bastianelli, Guetto and Vignoli, 2024). Since their transitions to democracy, educational attainment expanded in the last decades of the XX century. Notably, Italy still lags behind in tertiary education, with only 30.6 per cent of individuals aged 25–34 completing tertiary education (37.1 per cent women and 24.4 per cent men), compared with 52 per cent in Spain (58 per cent women and 46.1 per cent men) (data referring to 2023, Eurostat, 2024). This dramatic increase in educational levels, particularly among women starting from lower levels, favoured a quicker diffusion of new family models in Spain than in Italy (Adsera, 2005). Further, the sharp increase in education fostered high labour market aspirations among young women, which however, collided with poor labour market conditions and institutions unsuitable to receive them (Adsera, 2005).

The Italian and Spanish labour markets have been long characterized by a dual labour market and an insider-outsider divide, with women and young workers being over-represented among outsiders (Barbieri and Scherer, 2009; Bentolila, Dolado and Jimeno, 2012). Unemployment has been cyclical and remained high, especially in Spain, compared with other European countries (Eurostat, 2024). Youth employment instability has been prevalent whether through self-employment or temporary jobs (Adsera, 2006a, 2011). Furthermore, both countries were strongly affected by the Great Recession, including an increase in unemployment, precarious forms of employment, and the general spreading of uncertainty, all of which contributed to the postponement of family formation (Sobotka, Skirbekk and Philipov, 2011; Comolli, 2017). As of 2023, employment rates in both countries were among the lowest in the EU, reaching 61.5 per cent in Italy and 65.3 per cent in Spain, compared with the EU average of 70.4 per cent (15–64 years old). Labour market participation was particularly low among young adults (15–29 years old), with rates of 34.7 per cent in Italy and 39.6 per cent in Spain, well below the EU average of 49.7 per cent (Eurostat, 2024). These challenging economic conditions, combined with limited access to part-time work for those seeking to balance employment and family responsibilities, have made it difficult for young women to enter the workforce and consider motherhood. Indeed, despite women being more educated than men in both countries, notable gender differences in labour market participation remain. This is particularly evident in Italy, where in 2023, the employment rate among 15–64-year-olds was just 52.5

per cent for women, compared with 70.4 per cent for men. In Spain, the gap was narrower with 60.7 per cent of women and 70 per cent of men employed (Eurostat, 2024).

Despite the sharp increase in women's education and labour market participation, in both countries women have been the main responsible for the bulk of domestic work (González, Jurado and Naldini, 1999; Anxo *et al.*, 2007; Naldini and Jurado Guerrero, 2013; Dotti Sani, 2018). A comparative study using the harmonized 2010 Time-Use Survey for several European countries showed that in Italy women spent the most time on unpaid activities and gender differences in time spent on unpaid work were the largest, closely followed by Spain (Campaña, Gimenez-Nadal and Velilla, 2023). The latest data from the Italian Time Use Survey, dating back to 2013, indicates that in Italy, among dual earner couples, women still performed 69 per cent of domestic and care work (Bastianelli, Solera and Vignoli, 2025). A recent study using the 2018 Spanish Fertility Survey reports that over two-thirds of women state that they are responsible for more than 60 per cent of housework or childcare tasks. Only about 2 per cent of mothers with one child report that their partners do more than 60 per cent of these tasks, while around 30 per cent describe a balanced division of labour, performing between 41 per cent and 60 per cent of the total workload (Suero, 2023). Moreover, recent ethnographic research shows that Spanish women frequently cite the perceived burden of domestic responsibilities as one of the most important reasons for not having more children (Bueno and Brinton, 2019).

Italy and Spain were both traditionally characterized by a high degree of familism and strong family ties (Reher, 1998; León and Migliavacca, 2013). While strong family ties reflect a cultural trait of southern regions, familism emphasizes the family as the primary provider of welfare through solidarity and mutual aid across generations (Estévez-Abe, Yang and Choi, 2016). Indeed, traditionally, families served as buffers from socio-economic hardships or special needs, while the state's role in family welfare was primarily focused on protecting family heads (Ferrera, 1996; Mari-Klose and Moreno-Fuentes, 2013). Southern European families were shaped by a cultural norm of solidarity, which prescribed that the needy and the vulnerable should not be abandoned by their kin (Viazzo, 2010). The Catholic Church's social doctrine further reinforced this familistic culture, exerting significant influence on culture and social policy (Mari-Klose and Moreno-Fuentes, 2013; Vignoli and Salvini, 2014; Saraceno, 2016). Despite the strong emphasis on the family's role, social policies have not effectively supported families or enhanced their caregiving abilities. Instead, the emphasis on family responsibility has justified limited social services and

political inaction in these policy areas (Naldini and Saraceno, 2008; León and Migliavacca, 2013). In a study conducted about a decade ago, Naldini and Jurado (2013) analysed whether Italy and Spain still adhered to a traditional familistic welfare system or if they were transitioning towards a dual-earner family model. The study examined both the division between the State and the family and the division within the family. Their findings suggested significant changes in families and social policies over the preceding two decades particularly in Spain. Italy was recognized as maintaining a family/kinship-oriented welfare system, while Spain showed greater movement towards a dual-earner family model. The strong intergenerational bonds, deeply rooted in Southern European societies, combined with a welfare state that offers very limited direct support to young people, have been critical factors in the limited diffusion of new demographic behaviours in this region (Dalla Zuanna, 2004; Rosina and Fraboni, 2004; Di Giulio and Rosina, 2007). Since intergenerational ties and the need for parental help play such a central role in the southern context, children are expected—and often required—to consider their parents' attitudes when making their own life choices, and avoid conflict with their parents' values (Rosina and Fraboni, 2004; Di Giulio and Rosina, 2007).

Given their historical distinctive characteristics compared with other Western countries, as well as their notable similarities, Italy and Spain have often been classified under a distinct family model, commonly referred to as the 'Southern European' or 'Mediterranean family model' (Jurado Guerrero and Naldini, 1996; González, Jurado and Naldini, 1999; Karamessini, 2008; Mínguez and Crespi, 2017). The literature characterizes this model by several key features: (i) demographic preferences and trends that reflect a strong institutionalization of marriage and a high value placed on children, despite persistently low fertility rates largely attributed to precarious labour market conditions; (ii) gender roles that tend to follow either a predominant male-breadwinner model or a dual-burden model, in which women are expected to balance both paid work and family responsibilities; and (iii) family ties marked by close intergenerational co-residence, frequent social interactions, mutual support within kinship networks, and deeply rooted family-oriented values (Jurado Guerrero and Naldini, 1996; González, Jurado and Naldini, 1999; Karamessini, 2008; Mínguez and Crespi, 2017). Despite criticism of the term *traditional* (Raybould and Sear, 2021), in this study, we use *traditional families* to refer to those described by the Southern European family model, consistent with how *traditional* has been defined in the related literature.

Recent developments in demographic behaviours, attitudes and gender values

Undoubtedly, changes in family dynamics in Italy and Spain were initially slower than in other European countries. However, this has changed enormously over the past couple of decades. Despite grappling with the legacies of their pasts, both countries are gradually aligning with broader European trends, with Spain displaying notable convergence to those patterns. Can Italy and Spain still be considered as belonging to the same distinct traditional family model?

Figure 1 illustrates the evolution of key family demographic trends in Italy and Spain, alongside those in other European countries. The share of births occurring out of wedlock surged in the late 1990s, tripling over the past three decades with a notable acceleration in the last decade. By 2022, the percentage of births outside marriage reached 41.5 per cent in Italy and 50.1 per cent in Spain (Ine, 2024; Istat, 2024), figures comparable to those of many other European countries. Marriage rates have been declining, and the age at marriage has been increasing. Crude marriage rates dropped from 5.6 and 5.7, respectively in Italy and Spain in 1990, to respectively 3.2 and 3.7 in 2022.¹ The average age at marriage as of 2022 reached 34.9 years for women in Italy and 36.6 years for women in Spain (Ine, 2024; Istat, 2024), among the oldest in the European Union (Eurostat, 2024). While dissolution rates had always been low in Italy and Spain compared with those in most developed countries (Sobotka and Toulemon, 2008), divorce rates have surged, with Spain approaching the levels seen in many other European countries, and Italy following a similar trend. The spikes observed in divorce rates in Spain in 2005 and Italy in 2014 were a result of significant changes in divorce legislation. In Spain, these reforms allowed direct access to divorce without a prior legal separation period and introduced marriage dissolution based on mutual consent and unilateral demand. In Italy, the mandatory waiting period between separation and divorce was shortened, and the overall procedure was simplified (Istat, 2016). Overall, looking at these demographic trends, post-modern family demographic patterns appear to be more widespread in Spain than Italy, but Italy seems to follow the exact path of Spain with a lag of about a decade.

In relation to attitudes towards demographic behaviour, Southern Europe is often perceived as holding on to traditional orientations. Yet analyses of the European Values Study (EVS) from 1990 to 2017 show a clear evolution in views on marriage and divorce in both Italy and Spain (Figure 2). The share of respondents who consider marriage an outdated institution has risen markedly, reaching 36 per cent in Spain and 33

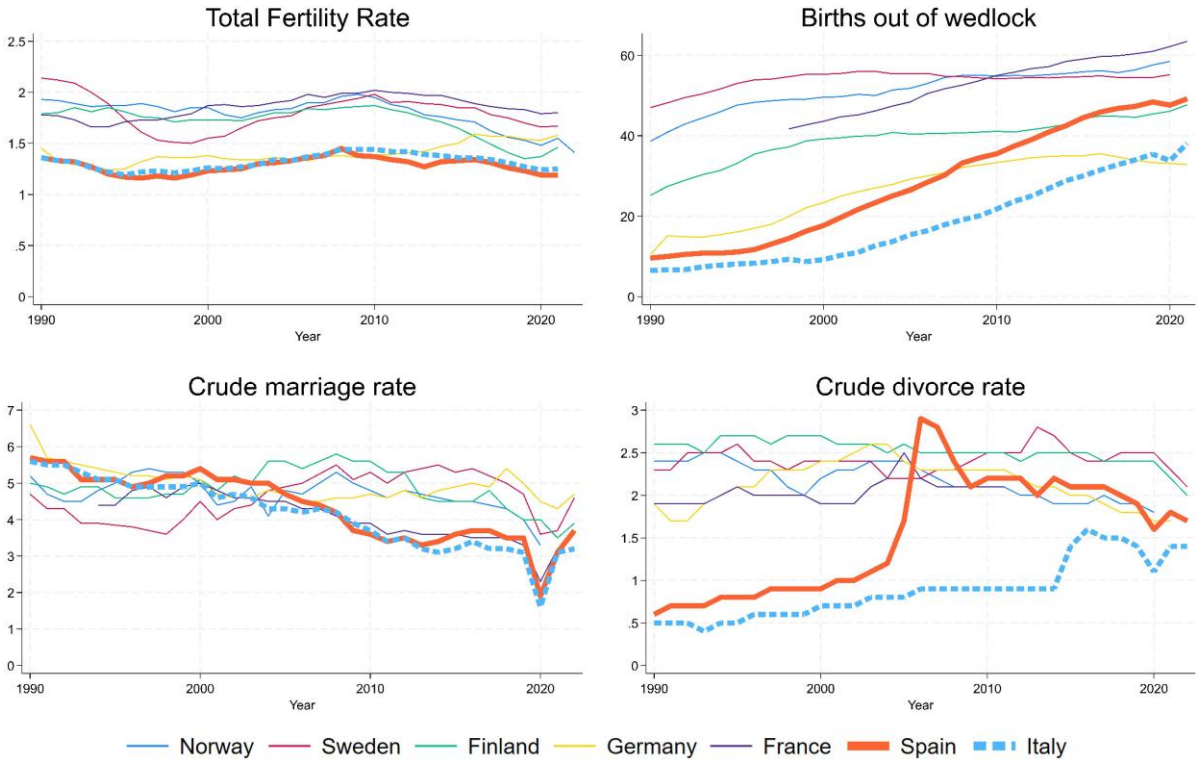


Figure 1 Recent family demographic trends in Italy, Spain and other European countries. Data retrieved from Eurostat and OECD database

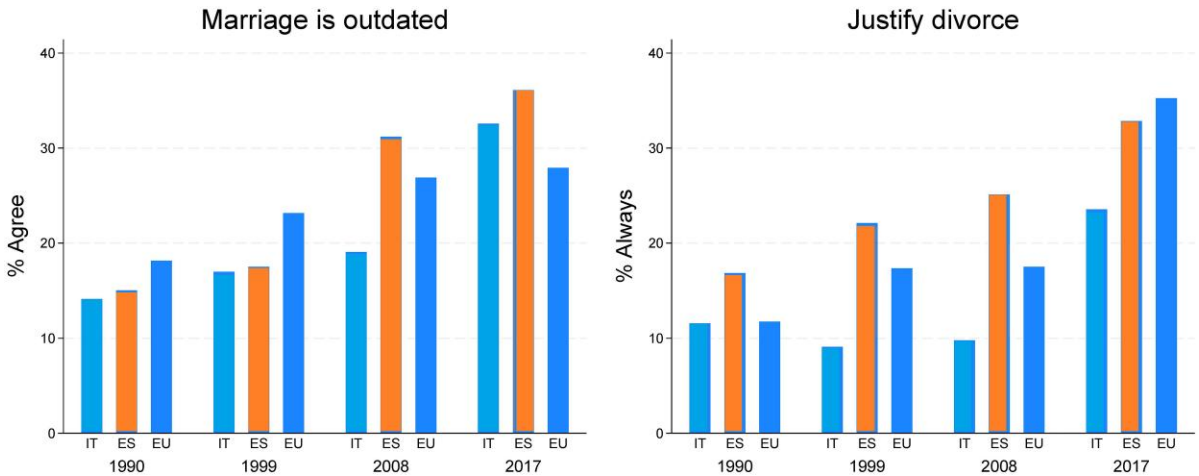


Figure 2 Evolution of attitudes towards marriage and divorce in Italy and Spain over time. % Agree with 'Marriage is an outdated institution' and % Always justifying divorce. EU refer to EU15. Values for men and women 18+. Data retrieved from the EVS

per cent in Italy in 2017, both above the EU average of 28 per cent. Acceptance of divorce also increased steadily since 1990. By 2017, one-third of Spaniards (33 per cent) and nearly a quarter of Italians (24 per cent)

judged divorce as always justifiable, though both countries still fell below the EU average of 35 per cent. In contrast, attitudes towards the ideal number of children have shown little change over the same period: the

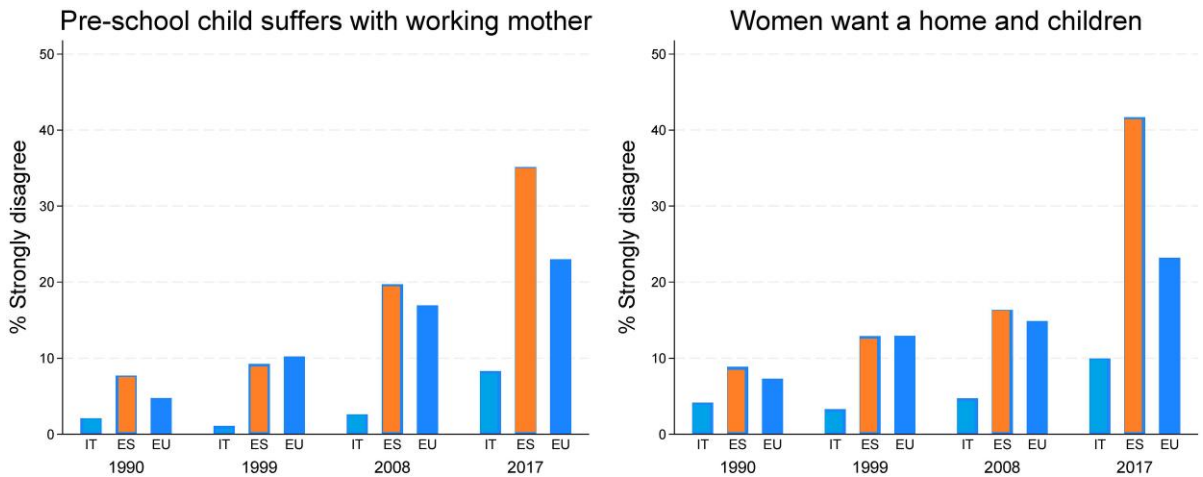


Figure 3 Evolution of beliefs on gender roles in Italy and Spain over time. % Strongly disagree with 'A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works' and 'A job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children'. EU refers to EU15. Values for men and women 18+. Data retrieved from the EVS

norm continues to be around two children in both countries, a stable aspiration that stands in stark contrast to the continued decline in actual fertility rates (Sobotka and Beaujouan, 2014; Luppi, Bellani and Rosina, 2025).

When considering gender equality and values in different life domains, differences between Italy and Spain are also evident. In the Gender Equality Index² developed by the European Institute of Gender Equality, Italy scored 53.3 in 2013 and 68.2 in 2023. Despite experiencing the largest increase in overall score over this period among all the Member States, Italy's current score still falls below the EU average (70.2). In contrast, Spain reported a much higher level of gender equality than Italy already in 2013, scoring 66.4, and 76.4 in the most recent evaluation, above the EU average (EIGE, 2024).

Time series from the EVS spanning from 1990 to 2017 display a significant evolution in values related to family gender roles both in Italy and Spain (Figure 3). As illustrated in Figure 2, the disagreement with the sentence 'A pre-school child is likely to suffer if his or her mother works' considerably increased in Italy from 1.1 per cent in 1990 to 8.3 per cent in 2017. In Spain the variation was larger from 7.7 per cent to 35.1 per cent. Similarly, in Spain, more than 40 per cent of the respondents in 2017 strongly disagreed with the statement 'A job is all right, but what most women really want is a home and children', whereas the percentage was approximately 10 per cent in Italy and 22 per cent on average in the EU-15. Particularly noteworthy is the fact that values related to gender equality in Spain surpassed the EU-15 average, aligning with those of leading European countries

in gender equality, such as Sweden or France. In contrast, Italy lags in this regard. As the most recent data available in the EVS is from 2017; more recent data is necessary to thoroughly explore the evolution of values.

Given the crucial changes observed in family demographic trends and attitudes, and beliefs on gender roles, we envisage that what is considered today an ideal family in Italy and Spain may diverge from the traditional Southern European family model. We expect that the more pronounced change in family behaviours and attitudes in Spain, is reflected in a higher detraditionalization of family ideals in Spain. Moreover, given that post-modern family patterns in the two countries began to spread first among the highly educated, we expect the patterns among the latter to be further apart from the traditional Southern European family model. Finally, given the persistent gender inequalities in both countries, where women often bear the double burden of work and family responsibilities and, given that recent cohorts of women are more educated on average than men, we expect to observe gender differences in family ideals.

Data and methods

To investigate family ideals, we designed a FSE involving family scenarios. FSEs have become increasingly popular for gaining insights into the multidimensional aspects of individuals' values, goals, and decision-making processes as they combine the advantages of surveys and experimental design (Auspurg and Hinz, 2014; McDonald, 2019; Aassve *et al.*, 2024a). Employing FSE to analyse family ideals by asking respondents to evaluate hypothetical families (vignettes) provides several benefits. Firstly, this experimental

design ensures that respondents' characteristics are independent of the dimensions of the family vignette they evaluate. Consequently, the effects of varying family dimensions on individual ratings can be interpreted as causal. Complete control over vignette characteristics also guarantees a higher level of internal validity compared with traditional survey methods. Furthermore, respondents in FSE studies evaluate vignettes that vary along multiple dimensions, allowing researchers to test various combinations. More importantly, as respondents evaluate simultaneously multiple dimensions within the hypothetical family depicted by the vignette, their evaluations reveal to what extent they are willing to trade off certain characteristics for others they consider more crucial. Finally, the multidimensionality of FSE minimizes concerns about respondents providing socially desirable answers because the variations across vignettes make it more challenging to discern the study's purpose (Auspurg and Hinz, 2014; McDonald, 2019; Aassve *et al.*, 2024a).

We collected our data in December 2021³ through an online survey including respondents between 25 and 50 years old, on quota samples by age and sex for Italy and Spain⁴ with post-stratification weights by age, sex and education developed for analysis (Aassve *et al.*, 2024a). The number of participants was 2,760 for Italy, and 2,741 for Spain. Participants were exposed to several vignettes describing families with different characteristics and were asked to rate whether the vignette described a family they would consider successful. Moreover, the survey comprised a very rich set of variables on demographic and socioeconomic characteristics of the respondents, which allowed us to account for heterogeneity in family ideals in our analysis.

Following the general recommendation of giving participants 5–10 vignettes (Auspurg and Hinz, 2014), respondents were randomly exposed to 6 vignettes, each describing a different hetero-normative family characterized by random variations in either 8 or 10 factors. We conducted two distinct experiments. Experiment A comprised vignettes depicting couples who were either married or cohabiting, with or without children. Experiment B, by contrast, focused solely on families with at least one child, and included the possibility that the couple was divorced. In Experiment B, we also introduced additional dimensions concerning children's educational aspirations and financial support. This distinction between Experiments A and B was made to ensure internal coherence: it reflects the implicit assumption that a divorced couple without mutual children no longer constitutes a family, and it prevents the combination of childless couples with dimensions concerning children's outcomes such as educational aspirations.

Vignette factors and levels are summarized in Table 1. Each of the 10 factors corresponds to different dimensions of family life. The first two factors assess the perceived success of postmodern demographic behaviours, such as cohabitation or divorce compared with marriage, as well as the presence and number of children. The relative level of income matters both as an indicator of economic security—especially for women outside the labour force in more traditional families—and as a resource for achieving goals such as children's educational aspirations. Other variables capture the importance of effective communication and emotional connection within the family—attributes that may hold greater significance in postmodern families, where higher-order needs have become more central. Next, the division of paid and unpaid work, along with work-family balance, is included to determine if gender egalitarianism is increasingly valued compared with both the traditional male breadwinner model and the female double burden model. Finally, factors such as family reputation within the community, the frequency of contact with extended family members, the importance of saving for children's future, and children's educational outcomes are assessed to gauge the relevance of familism and kinship solidarity. It is important to note that we do not intend to categorize each attribute as strictly postmodern or traditional Southern European. For example, factors such as communication and income may be important in both traditional and postmodern family settings. However, the literature highlights how some of these factors have become more salient in postmodern families, especially when compared with more traditional elements, such as clearly defined family roles or kinship solidarity. Our vignette approach is particularly well-suited to uncovering the relative importance that respondents today attach to these factors.

The order of factors is randomized across participants and kept the same for each participant. Participants were required to spend a minimum of 15 s on each vignette page before progressing, and the time they spent on each vignette was recorded. After each vignette, respondents were asked the following questions:

Based on this description, to what extent do you agree or disagree:

1. This describes a successful family.
2. This describes a family I would like to have.

Responses were rated on a scale from 0 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree).

For this analysis, we used the question 'This describes a successful family' as the dependent variable, as it

Table 1 Vignettes' factors and levels for Experiment A and B

Family attributes	Levels	
	Experiment A	Experiment B
Union status	Cohabiting Married	Cohabiting Married Divorced
Fertility	No children 1 child 2 children 3 children	1 child 2 children 3 children
Household income	Lower than average Around average More than average	Lower than average Around average More than average
Family communication	Not open Open	Not open Open
Gender share of paid and unpaid work	Traditional Women double burden Egalitarian	Traditional Women double burden Egalitarian
Work-life balance	Both conflicted Only female conflicted Only male conflicted Neither conflicted	Both conflicted Only female conflicted Only male conflicted Neither conflicted
Community respect	Not well respected Well respected	Not well respected Well respected
Extended family contact	Infrequent Frequent	Infrequent Frequent
Financial support to children		Not saving Saving
Children educational outcome		High school Bachelor degree postgraduate

better captures ascribed family ideals rather than personal aspirations. However, as a robustness check, we also conducted the analysis using the question on personal desires. The results were largely similar, suggesting that respondents did not strongly differentiate between what they consider a successful family and the type of family they would like to have.

Supplementary Figure A1 shows an example of a vignette. Crossing all possible vignette levels would generate 2,304 different profiles. We use the %mktex and %mktblock macros in SAS (Kuhfeld, 2001) to select a d-efficient subsample that consists of 576 vignettes into 96 blocks of 6 vignettes. D-efficiency is 99.88, which exceeds the commonly accepted D-efficiency value 90 (Auspurg and Hinz, 2014), rendering sufficient statistical power to obtain unbiased estimates for each experiment.

Since the six reported vignettes per respondent are nested within respondents, we fitted linear random intercept models with two levels to the data, separately for Italy and Spain. The dependent variable measures the rating given to each family profile presented as

'successful' on a scale from 0 to 10, treated as a continuous variable. The independent variables are expressed in terms of the family dimensions included in the vignette (as outlined in Table 1). Models control for the order in which the vignettes were displayed in the experiment. Through these models we estimate the relative importance attributed to each family factor in the vignettes in the overall evaluation of a family. Further, we run separate analyses to account for respondent's characteristics disentangling the hypothesized differences across gender and educational levels.

Results

Descriptive results

For descriptive purposes, Table 2 presents the main characteristics of the respondents in Italy and Spain.

The samples in both countries reflect current demographic and social conditions. The average number of children per respondent is very low (below one), (slightly higher in Spain 0.91) compared with 0.72 in Italy). In

Table 2 Descriptive characteristics of Italian and Spanish samples

	Italy			Spain		
	Mean	SD	N	Mean	SD	N
Number of children (0–5)	0.72	0.94	2,760	0.91	0.96	2,741
Ever cohabited	0.54	0.50	2,760	0.81	0.39	2,741
Education (ISCED 0–8)	3.74	1.89	2,760	4.41	2.16	2,741
Father education (ISCED 0–8)	2.37	1.51	2,683	2.95	2.07	2,654
Mother education (ISCED 0–8)	2.35	1.46	2,676	2.64	1.90	2,687
Catholic	0.65	0.48	2,760	0.51	0.50	2,741
Church attendance: at least once a month	0.29	0.45	2,760	0.22	0.42	2,741
Dual earner couples with same share of unpaid work	0.37	0.48	604	0.60	0.49	768

The sample includes individuals between 25 and 50 years old. Weighted data. SD, standard deviation.

our sample, among the 25–50 years old, 56 per cent of Italian and 46 per cent of Spanish respondents are childless. A much higher share of Spanish respondents has ever experienced cohabitation (81 per cent in Spain versus 54 per cent in Italy). Furthermore, Spanish respondents exhibit higher levels of education, as do their parents. Interestingly, a lower percentage of Spanish respondents identify as Catholic (51 per cent in Spain compared with 65 per cent in Italy), and fewer attend church regularly (22 per cent versus 29 per cent). Additionally, a larger proportion of Spanish respondents belong to the gender egalitarian couple category, where both partners work and share unpaid work equally (60 per cent in Spain compared with 37 per cent in Italy). This descriptive information already suggests that Spanish respondents could be more inclined towards embracing postmodern behaviours compared with their Italian counterparts.

Family ideals in Italy and Spain

Figure 4 presents the coefficients estimated with a linear multilevel regression model, separately for Italy and Spain for the whole weighted sample. The figure illustrates characteristics that respondents link to a successful family in Italy and Spain, for experiments A and B. Tables with the full models are presented in Supplementary Table A1.

Considering the perceived success of cohabiting couples compared with married ones, results in Experiment A and B are slightly different. In Experiment A, which includes the possibility of vignettes with childless couples, differences between marriage and cohabitation are on average not statistically significant, despite the negative coefficient of cohabitation in both Italy and Spain. This suggests that cohabitation is not deemed less successful than marriage in this setting. However,

when looking at Experiment B, which only includes couples with children, Italian respondents associate marriage more strongly with a successful family compared with cohabitation. In contrast, in Spain, there are again no significant differences between the two union types. Hence, although cohabitation is becoming more prevalent in both countries, in Italy, within the context of families with children described in Experiment B, cohabitation is still perceived as a less favourable arrangement. Similarly, while divorce is largely penalized as indicative of an unsuccessful family in both countries, Italy holds a more negative view of it compared with Spain. To properly interpret these estimates, it is important to remember that divorce is always depicted in vignettes that present a hypothetical family with children, and this may indeed contribute to its negative evaluation.

The role of parenthood and of the number of children for an ideal family is similar in the two countries. Experiment A shows that childless families are considered less successful than families with at least one child. Additionally, it appears that families with two children are slightly preferred relative to those with only one child. Families with three children are not valued more positively than families with only one child. This result seems to confirm the persistence of the traditional preference for the two-child family in both countries. Nevertheless, when looking at Experiment B that excludes childless families, a few differences between the two countries emerge. In Italy, a family with two children is considered more successful than one with a single child. In Spain, there is no substantial difference in perception between families of one, two, or three children. Thus, it seems that, in Spain, the introduction of additional dimensions, such as educational aspirations for children and the related burden of financially

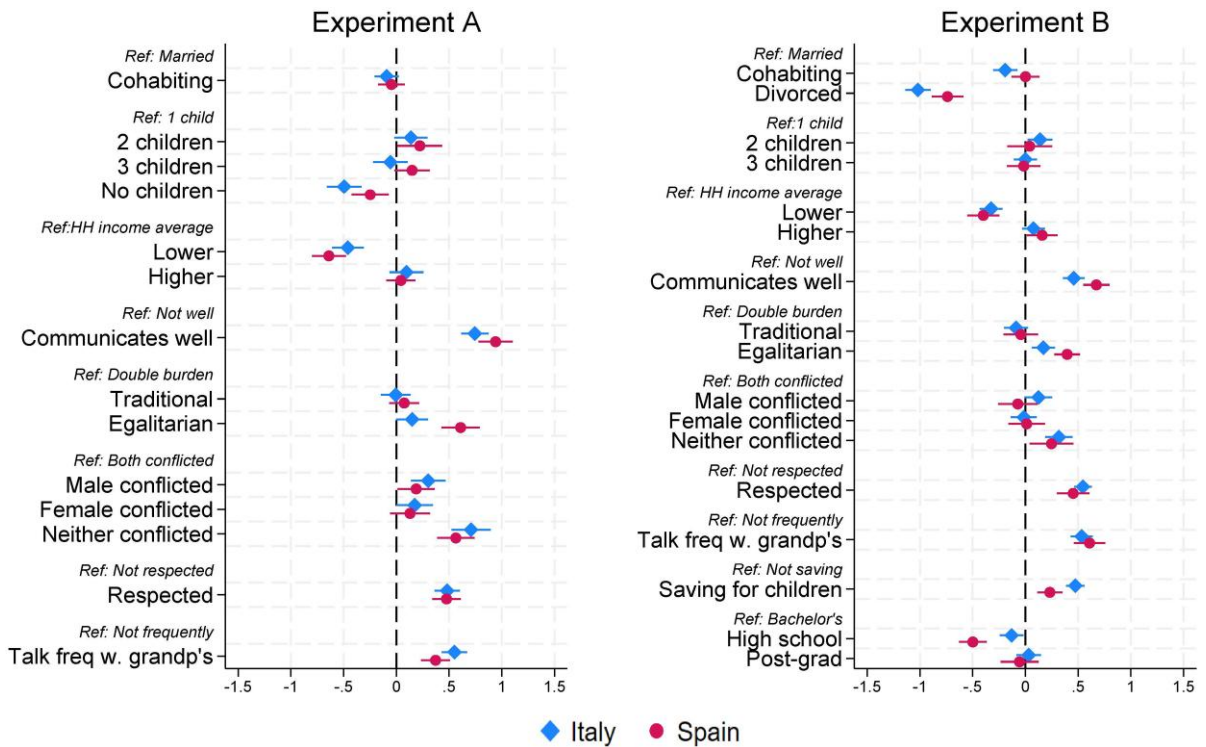


Figure 4 Family ideals in Italy and Spain. Coefficient plot from random intercept regression models. 95% confidence intervals. The full models are reported in [Supplementary Table A1](#)

supporting them (Experiment B), changes the relative importance of having more than one child, provided they have one.

Families with a lower-than-average income are perceived as less successful, while having an income above the average is valued positively, consistently in both Experiments A and B, and in both countries.

Interestingly, effective communication among family members is not only significantly but strongly associated with a more successful family in both countries. However, in Experiment B, it appears to be more important in Spain than in Italy.

Similarly, the importance of a more egalitarian share of paid and unpaid work within the couple is also recognized in both countries, but particularly emphasized by Spanish respondents, as evident in both Experiment A and B.

The absence of conflict between work and family responsibilities for either partner is deemed crucial for a successful family in both countries. Likewise, family respect in the community and frequent communication with grandparents and the extended family are positively associated with family success in both countries.

Regarding attributes related to children, a lower level of educational attainment is viewed more negatively in Spain than in Italy. In contrast, savings for a child's

future are considered more important in Italy, highlighting a greater emphasis on familial support and assistance in Italy.

While analysing cohort differences would have offered valuable insights, our data did not permit it, as it is cross-sectional and limited to individuals aged 25–50. To approximate cohort effects, we conducted an additional analysis by dividing respondents into those under 40 and those aged 40 and above (results not shown but available upon request). Overall, findings were largely consistent across both groups; however, several noteworthy patterns emerged. In Experiment A, younger Italians showed no clear preference for families with two children compared with those with fewer children, the negative evaluation of childlessness was not significant among younger Spanish respondents, and younger Spanish respondents appeared to view divorce less negatively than older respondents.

The role of education and gender

Differences by respondent's educational level

To analyse differences based on respondents' education levels, we estimated separate linear multilevel regression models by country and education, distinguishing

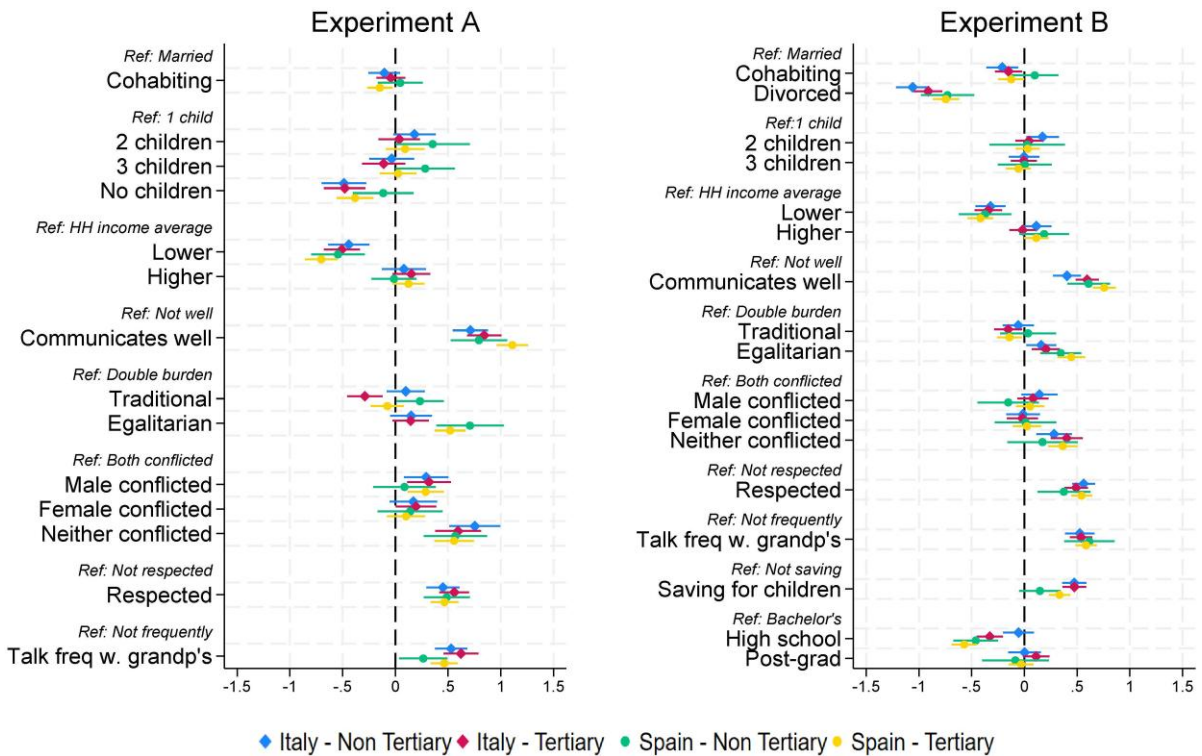


Figure 5 Family ideals in Italy and Spain by education. Coefficient plot from random intercept regression models. 95% confidence intervals The full models are reported in [Supplementary Table A1.1](#)

between individuals with and without tertiary education. The models' coefficients are displayed graphically in [Figure 5](#), while the full tables are presented in [Supplementary Table A2](#).

Looking at differences across respondent's education in preferences for partnership type (marriage versus cohabitation) reveals divergent trajectories between Italy and Spain. In Italy, the association does not vary across level of education. In Experiment A there are no significant differences in the evaluation of marriage and cohabitation, while in Experiment B, when couples are always parents, cohabitation is deemed less successful than marriage. In contrast, in Spain, in both Experiment A and B, cohabitation is regarded as equally successful as marriage among individuals without tertiary education, while highly educated Spanish respondents tend to view cohabitation as less successful than marriage. This finding contrasts with the expectation that post-modern demographic behaviour would be more widely accepted among the highly educated. This result could be attributed to the widespread diffusion of cohabitation in Spain, permeating all societal strata. Consequently, marriage may have evolved into a symbol of privilege primarily associated with the

upper class, as has been found in countries such as the United States ([Cherlin, 2018](#)). Regarding the number of children, an intriguing distinction arises when stratifying by education. Specifically, the preference for a two-child family is specific to Italians without tertiary education (Experiment B). Another noteworthy discrepancy lies in the perceived importance of children's education. In Italy, education for children holds significant weight only for those with tertiary education. In Spain instead, there is no significant divergence in the importance attributed to children education across educational levels.

Differences by respondent's gender

To identify specific gender patterns in preferences, we estimated separate linear multilevel regression models by country and gender. The coefficients from these models are graphically displayed in [Figure 6](#), while the complete tables can be found in [Supplementary Table A3](#).

The most notable disparities are found in the importance of communication within the family. While effective communication among family members is

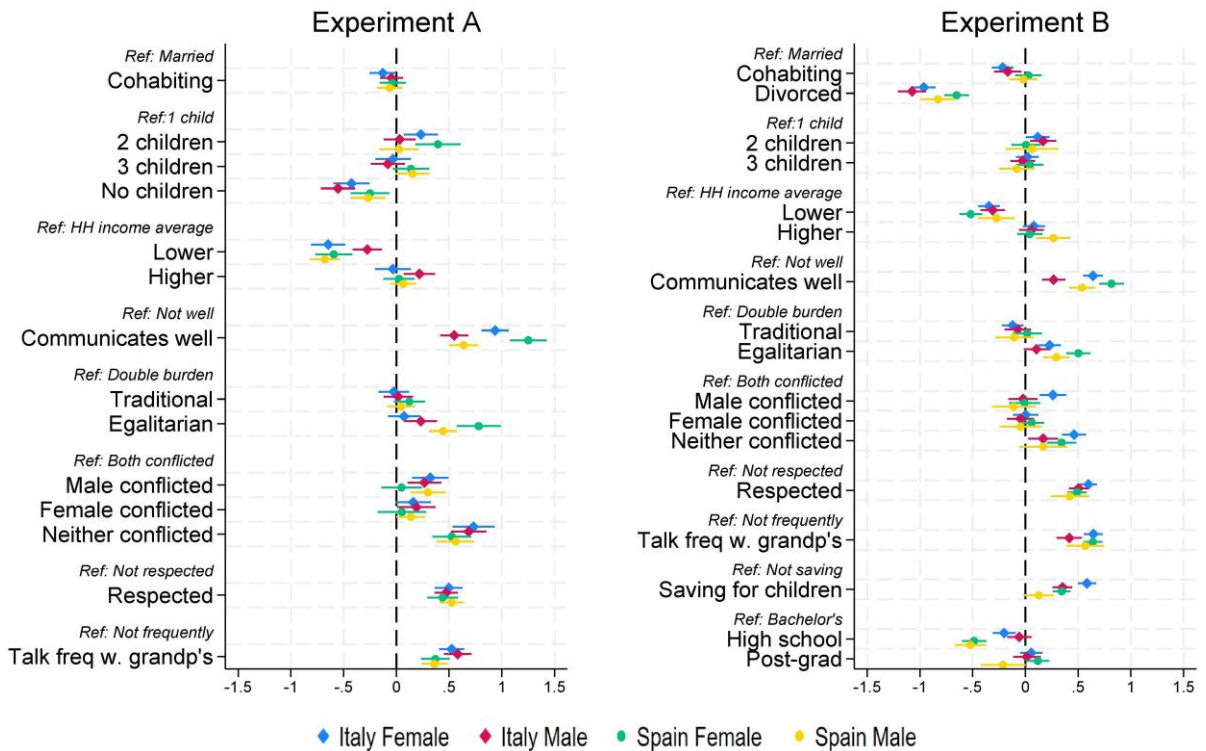


Figure 6 Family ideals in Italy and Spain by gender. Coefficient plot from random intercept regression models. 95% confidence intervals. The full models are reported in [Supplementary Table A1.2](#)

considered crucial by all genders in both countries, it is particularly valued by women, with Spanish women assigning the highest importance to it. Similarly, Spanish women are also those who most value an egalitarian division of labour between partners. Finally, it seems that women in both countries place more importance than men in saving for their children’s future.

Discussion

This study examines whether Italy and Spain uphold traditional family ideals linked to the Southern European family model, challenging the view that they are uniformly family-oriented. Furthermore, it compares family ideals between the two countries and examines how these ideals vary by education and gender. To thoroughly examine family ideals, we designed a FSE, presenting respondents with various family scenarios to evaluate. By moving away from the conventional approach of analysing specific family dimensions in isolation, which often overlooks critical trade-offs, our factorial experimental design, instead, establishes those net of the other factors incorporated in the design. Further, by including all the dimensions together, we compare their relative importance.

Overall, our study shows rather modern family ideals in both countries, with a more deinstitutionalized context in Spain compared with Italy. Our investigation into relationship patterns revealed that in Italy, cohabitation is viewed less favourably than marriage only among families with children, regardless of educational and gender differences. In Spain, there is no overall difference in the evaluation of marriage and cohabitation; however, cohabitation is perceived less favourably among the highly educated. This difference across educational groups may reflect the widespread acceptance of cohabitation in Spain, which potentially has made marriage a symbol of privilege more closely associated with the upper class. (Cherlin, 2020). It may also be consistent with the finding that, even in contexts like the US highly educated embrace cohabitation to the same extent that low educated, they prefer childbearing to occur within marriage (Lundberg, Pollak, and Stearns, 2016). Divorce, on the other hand, is considered indicative of an unsuccessful family in both countries, across gender and educational backgrounds, with Italian respondents holding a more negative view of divorce compared with the Spaniards. These findings are consistent with EVS data (Figure 2), showing greater acceptance of divorce and

a stronger belief that marriage is outdated in Spain to Italy.

A noteworthy finding is that, despite persistently low fertility in both countries, parenthood remains highly valued, with a slight preference for two-child families over one-child families in both Italy and Spain. However, in Spain, when other family dimensions are considered, the number of children becomes less important, consistent with fertility levels well below the traditional two-child ideal. In contrast, Italian respondents continue to favour families with two children over those with one. The analysis by education reveals that the preference for a two-child family is specific to Italians without tertiary education, suggesting that cross-country differences in educational composition may help explain variations in family-size preferences. These findings complement broader patterns in Western societies, where surveys consistently show a persistent two-child ideal, despite persistently low fertility rates continue (Sobotka and Beaujouan, 2014). Our experiment demonstrates that when individuals consider multiple dimensions, they are willing to trade off the number of children for gains in areas such as family communication, gender equality, and work-family balance and family, provided they still become parents.

Importantly, our study shows that both effective family communication and gender equality are crucial elements of the ideal family outweighing marriage, number of children, or income, in shaping positive family evaluations in both Italy and Spain. These findings suggest that the quality of relationships between partners and with children deserves greater attention in understanding what people value most in families. While both features are positively evaluated in both countries, they are considered more essential in Spain. Our analysis of gender differences indicates that effective communication is especially crucial for women in both countries. As women have become more educated—often surpassing men—and integrated into the labour market, the family's traditional role as a source of economic security for women lacking outside options has diminished. Rather, effective communication has become more central—particularly for women—as families navigate increasingly complex roles within and outside the household.

When considering child-related attributes, clear differences emerge between Spain and Italy. In Spain, lower educational attainment is viewed more negatively, reflecting the country's strong emphasis on education and upward mobility. Conversely, in Italy, saving for a child's future is considered more important, highlighting the importance of family support and financial assistance.

This study has some limitations. First, its cross-sectional nature prevents analysis of how family ideals change over time; while our findings capture current

perceptions, they cannot track their evolution. Second, the use of an online quota sample may introduce selection bias. For example, highly educated individuals might be overrepresented. As noted, post-stratification weights were applied to mitigate this concern. Additionally, the analysis by education level serves as a robustness check regarding respondent education. Third, while vignettes allow respondents to evaluate hypothetical scenarios in a standardized way, they also have limitations. One concern is whether respondents are fully engaged. To ensure data quality, we implemented attention checks, limiting analyses to those who passed them, and required a minimum viewing time per screen. Responses were also reviewed for coherence and consistency. Although full attentiveness cannot be guaranteed, the overall coherence and consistency of responses suggest meaningful engagement with the task. Another limitation of this survey design comes from the definition of the dependent variable. Since it is a subjective measure, not reflecting a tangible outcome, we cannot make strong statements about its consequence on aggregate demographic measures, such as actual fertility trends. Finally, while we examine within-country heterogeneity through the lens of education and gender, our study gives limited attention to regional differences, which are indeed important in shaping cultural, economic, and institutional inequalities in both countries, and may influence family behaviours (for instance in the faster and higher diffusion of cohabitation and divorce in Northern and central regions in Italy; e.g., Gabrielli and Vignoli, 2013) and may also therefore influence family ideals. Future research should investigate family ideals more deeply by taking regional divergences within countries into account.

Despite these limitations, this comprehensive examination provides valuable insights into the changing family ideals in Italy and Spain. Influenced heavily by their respective authoritarian pasts and the pervasive role of the Catholic Church, and long-standing historical and cultural specificities, both countries initially long-resisted shifts in family and gender roles. They continue to face persistent challenges related to high unemployment rates, employment instability, and entrenched gender norms that both hinder gender equality and complicate family formation. The enduring culture of familialism has historically compensated for limited state support but has also reinforced traditional family structures and delayed broader social changes. Yet, both countries are now gradually aligning with broader European trends, moving away from traditional familistic models towards more egalitarian family dynamics like those found in central and northern Europe. Notably, Spain has advanced further in education and gender equality, reflected in the wider diffusion

of postmodern family ideals and behaviours compared with Italy.

While the evolution of societal values played a pivotal role in the spread of new family demographic trends, the surge of new family patterns may have, in turn, contributed to a redefinition of what constitutes an ‘ideal’ family. As these alternative family trajectories become more common and widespread in society, they gradually shed their earlier stigma, becoming more widely accepted (Festinger, 1957). It is important to note that drawing precise connections between trends in family attitudes and behaviours can be a complex endeavour and exceeds the scope of this study. Nevertheless, examining both behaviours and ideals provides a comprehensive understanding of the deinstitutionalization of family in countries that have historically been characterized by traditional family patterns.

Notes

1. The crude marriage rate is the ratio of the number of marriages during the year to the average population in that year. The value is expressed per 1000 inhabitants.
2. The Gender Equality Index is a composite indicator developed by the European Institute for Gender Equality (EIGE). It provides a comprehensive measure of gender equality based on six core life domains, i.e. work, money, knowledge, time, power and health, and two additional domains i.e. violence against women and intersecting inequalities. <https://eige.europa.eu/gender-equality-index/about>
3. The data collection took place during a period partially affected by the COVID-19 pandemic; however, we do not expect this to have systematically influenced how respondents evaluate an ideal or successful family in any predictable way.
4. The survey was conducted in 8 countries, namely Italy, Spain, (urban) China, Singapore, South Korea, Japan, USA, and Norway. In this paper, to address our research question, we use only the two national sub-samples of Italy and Spain.

Author contributions

Arnstein Aassve (Conceptualization [equal], Data curation [equal], Resources [equal], Supervision [equal], Writing—review & editing [equal]), Alícia Adserà (Conceptualization [equal], Data curation [equal], Resources [equal], Supervision [equal], Writing—review & editing [equal]), Elena Bastianelli (Conceptualization [equal], Data curation [equal], Formal analysis [lead], Visualization [lead], Writing—original draft [lead], Writing—review & editing [equal]), and Letizia Mencarini (Conceptualization [equal], Data curation [equal], Resources [equal], Supervision [equal], Writing—review & editing [equal])

Supplementary data

Supplementary data are available at [ESR](#) online.

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Data availability

The data used in this analysis have been deposited and are publicly accessible at the following link: <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataset.xhtml?persistentId=doi:10.7910/DVN/LR2B6Y>.

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